



**“There’s more to it”:  
A qualitative study into the motivation of  
Australian university students to learn German**

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This article presents the findings of an interview study investigating the motivation of Australian university students to learn German. The aim of the study was to update, explain, complement and expand an earlier large-scale questionnaire survey on the same subject. The new qualitative data indicates that there is often “more to it” than having a general interest in German-speaking people and their culture, enjoying the learning process, wanting to travel to Germany, or seeing career advantages. While these motivational factors that were established from the questionnaire data are still existent in the interview data, the new data suggests that personal growth (*Ideal L2 Self*) is a strong element in students’ motivation. Furthermore, the new data has revealed that students consider learning German, and most likely a second language in general, as adding value to their primary degree subjects. This appears to be a particular strong motive for learners with English as their first language. The article concludes by discussing some of the study’s implications for curriculum design, student recruitment and student retention.

## **1. Introduction**

While less than 15% of Year 12 students in Australia learn a language other than English at school (Curnow 2010: 38), universities have in recent years recorded a sound interest in students learning a language, particularly European languages at the beginners’ level (Nettelbeck et al. 2007: 12). Given that only a handful of university degrees require language study (e.g. some Bachelor of International Studies or Bachelor of Languages programs) the question arises as to what motivates Australian university students to learn a language as part of their degree?

In 2012 the Australian government released a white paper on *Australia in the Asian Century* (Commonwealth of Australia 2012). The document makes a strong, primarily economic case for Australia’s need for more speakers of Asian languages, but in doing so it implicitly also raises the question of the role of non-Asian languages in 21<sup>st</sup> century Australia.

This article presents the results of a qualitative study that investigates the motivation of Australian undergraduates to study German. Insights into what brings students into the language classroom will assist language professionals with regard to curriculum design, teaching strategies, as well as with student recruitment and retention. The study is a follow-up study of a large-scale questionnaire survey that investigated the motivation of 520 Australian university students to learn German (Schmidt 2011). While the first study followed a quantitative approach, the new study takes a qualitative approach using interviews for its data collection. The aims of the new study are to update, explain, complement and expand the findings of the questionnaire survey.

The article initially discusses the theoretical framework in which the new study is situated before section 3 outlines the research design of the study. Section 4 will then present the main results of the data analysis with section 5 discussing some of the findings in the context of the initial research questions. The article concludes by considering some implications of the study's outcomes.

## 2. Theoretical background

According to Dörnyei (2001: 7) "the term 'motivation' presents a real mystery", because it is widely used, but with very different meanings. When language teachers, for example, talk about the level of motivation of their students, they usually refer to their students' interest in participating in classroom activities. Conversely, if a student were asked what their motivation is to learn a particular language, the question would be targeted at the person's reasons for learning that language such as an interest in the associated culture or for career reasons.

Research into language learning motivation dates back to 1959 when the two Canadian social psychologists Robert Gardner and Wallace Lambert demonstrated that not only linguistic aptitude, but also a "motivational factor" influences second-language achievement (Gardner & Lambert 1959: 271). Their model became famous for its dichotomy of two motivational orientations, first, the integrative orientation and second, the instrumental orientation. Gardner (1985) took the model further and developed a socio-educational model around his concept of the *integrative motive*. While integrating the educational environment into his model, *integrativeness* with its integrative

orientation and positive attitudes towards the target language community remained strong features of the revised model.

In the early 1990s a number of articles emerged that challenged Gardner's model (see for example Crookes & Schmidt 1991, Dörnyei 1994, Oxford & Shearin 1994). Given that most of Gardner's research was conducted in a Canadian bilingual environment some questioned whether the model also explained motivation in a foreign language learning environment where learners had no contact with speakers from the target language culture and therefore could not develop attitudes about the culture (Dörnyei 1990: 69). More recently it has been asked whether Gardner's concept of integrative motivation can be applied to languages that have become global languages, such as English, without a specific culture attached to them (Dörnyei 2009: 23-24, Ushioda & Dörnyei 2009: 2-3). Dörnyei (2010: 78-79) has therefore shifted the integrative motivation from the learner's goal to become like someone from the target language community, to the learner's goal to develop themselves closer towards their own "ideal self". If the "ideal self" includes proficiency in another language Dörnyei considers this "Ideal L2 Self" as a motivation similar to Gardner's traditional concept of *integrativeness*.

In the last twenty-five years two comprehensive studies (Ammon 1991, Schmidt 2011) have investigated the reasons why Australian university students learn German. Ammon's and Schmidt's analyses focus on what Dörnyei & Otto (1998: 47-48) describe as the "preactional phase", i.e. on the "motivational influences" that initially lead students to choose German as part of their degree. The findings of both studies point to a diversity of motives with Schmidt (2011: 110) identifying three motivational factors that reveal a more complex picture than Gardner's traditional dichotomy. The first and most dominant motivational factor relates to "a general interest in the German language and culture paired with a joy and an appreciation of learning languages". The second factor corresponds to "the wish to communicate in a German-speaking country while working, studying or travelling". The third factor reflects "German being considered as an important (business) language that could bring professional advantages".

The overall results of Schmidt's study are in line with other research into the motivation of university students to learn German. One of the most comprehensive – and ongoing – research projects are Riemer's *Länderstudien* which in 2011 included data from

nineteen countries (Riemer 2011). Riemer (2006: 55) distinguishes between learners from countries that are geographically close or remote to the German-speaking countries. With regard to learners from geographically remote countries, such as Australia, her data points to strong positive attitudes towards German-speaking people and their culture confirming Schmidt's first motivational factor. Furthermore, Riemer (2006: 54) refers to instrumental reasons (Schmidt's third factor) as "Exotenmotiv", i.e. learners regard a knowledge of German as a skill that makes them special in their field of expertise.

Busse & Walter (2013: 435-436) emphasize that it has become increasingly difficult in English-speaking countries to motivate students, both at secondary and tertiary level, to learn a foreign language. They found in their longitudinal study on the motivation of English university students studying German that there was a strong "wish to gain *language proficiency* and a very high *intrinsic* motivation" (Busse & Williams 2010: 81; see also Busse & Walter 2013). It appears that in addition to geographical factors motivation is also influenced by the learner's first language. The United Kingdom and Australia are both English-speaking countries and with English being considered as a global language native speakers of English have less incentives to learn another language for instrumental reasons such as working overseas. The absence of strong instrumental reasons was also evident in Schmidt's (2011) study in which the third motivational factor, that reflects career-related reasons for studying German, was the weakest.

As shown above, Schmidt's (2011) findings are in agreement with other studies, however, there was less evidence of Dörnyei's (2010: 78-79) concept of the *Ideal L2 Self* which might have been caused by the nature of the questionnaire. The new qualitative study presented in this article therefore not only aims to explain but also to expand the 2011 study by exploring concepts such as the *Ideal L2 Self*.

### **3. Research design**

#### **3.1 Methodology**

Ammon's and Schmidt's studies both stand in the tradition of quantitative research that has dominated research into language learning motivation since Gardner & Lambert's 1959 publication. Since that publication many studies have used questionnaires and scales to collect data about learners' motives and attitudes and have applied statistical measures when analysing the data. As Ushioda & Dörnyei (2012: 401) point out it has been widely accepted that "rigor and systematicity in data-gathering and analysis, as well as comparability and replicability of data, and generalizability to wider populations" are strong features of this quantitative approach. However, as Dörnyei (2001: 193) emphasizes, by averaging out responses quantitative methods do not "do justice to the subjective variety of an individual life", an aspect which is considered as one of the main disadvantages of quantitative research. In particular with the current focus on the "Ideal L2 Self", it does not surprise that in recent years qualitative methods such as learner biographies (e.g. Riemer 2011) or interviews have been used increasingly to broaden the scope of the quantitative tradition (cf. Dörnyei & Ushioda 2011: 237, Ushioda & Dörnyei 2012: 401-402). Increasingly, both methods are being combined "to capitalize on the best of both traditions and overcome many of their shortcomings" as O'Leary (2010: 127) observes in general. The interview study presented in this article falls into what Ivankova & Creswell (2009: 139) call the "explanatory design" category, i.e. "qualitative findings are used to help explain, refine, clarify, or extend quantitative results".

In 2013, sixteen interviews with university students of German were conducted to update, explain, complement and expand the results of the above mentioned 2005 questionnaire survey (Schmidt 2011) that investigated the motivation of 520 Australian university students learning German. For example, what did respondents mean when they stated in 2005 that they were "interested in German-speaking people and their culture"? Furthermore, it was expected that interviews would invite respondents to express motives that were not covered by the rather closed format of the 2005 questionnaire. The following sub-section outlines the data collection and data analysis procedures.

### 3.2 Methods

#### *Participants*

Although the sixteen participants of the interview study were not from the same cohort that had been surveyed in 2005 they share similar backgrounds. All sixteen were undergraduates and enrolled in various disciplines, ranging from science, business, arts, and law, to sports studies. Only one student enrolled in a Bachelor of International Studies had language study mandated by his degree. The others studied German as an elective or as part of a Diploma in Languages. Twelve students attended the beginners' level and four the intermediate level. Only one participant was an international student and four had German heritage. When compared with 2005, the interview study had a larger percentage of male participants (10 male students, 6 female students). All interviewees named English as their first language.

While the 520 participants in 2005 came from ten Australian universities, all sixteen students interviewed in 2013 were enrolled at the University of Queensland (UQ), a prestigious research-intensive university that belongs to Australia's Group of Eight universities. The University of Queensland was chosen because in 2005 the largest number of participants came from UQ. Since the analysis of the 2005 data did not reveal major significant differences between the ten universities it can be assumed that the responses given by the interviewees are not specific for UQ only. All sixteen students self-selected to be interviewed after information about the study was circulated in class. With regard to the results presented in section 4 it is important to keep in mind that participants who self-select most likely fall into the group of "committed language students" (Martin & Jansen 2012: 176), i.e. students who are highly motivated. Appendix A provides a table with information about the sixteen participants.

#### *Data collection*

The interviews were conducted in the fourth and fifth week of the first semester in 2013, a good time to investigate the initial motivation that had brought students in the language classroom. They were conducted on-campus, lasted for about 30 minutes and were audio-recorded. The set-up of the interviews followed common interview techniques such as outlined by Kvale (2007). The semi-structured interviews began with an open question about the respondent's reasons for learning German which then led to follow-up questions or questions along the interview guide (Appendix B). Some of the

questions were replicated from Busse & Williams's (2010) study of English university students learning German. Their questions were based in part on Ushioda's 1996 study. The interviews were conducted in English.

#### *Data analysis*

All interviews were transcribed verbatim by the author. In addition, noticeable non-verbal features such as pauses, cut-offs, laughter, emphasis and sound-stretching were marked in the transcripts using transcription symbols as used in conversation analysis (cf. Hutchby & Wooffitt 1998: vi-vii). Appendix C lists the symbols used in the transcripts.

The data analysis followed a mixture of grounded theory coding methods (see for example Charmaz 2006: 42-71) and general content analysis principles applied in qualitative research (see for example O'Leary 2010: 256-277). After an initial (nearly) line-by-line coding the data was reduced to common themes expressing the participants' motivation to learn German. As the aim of the study was to update, explain, complement and expand the 2005 questionnaire study the identified themes were, where possible, matched to one of the three main motivational factors found in the 2005 data. Newly discovered themes assisted in extending the motivational framework. For managing and analysing the data the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA (version 11) was used.

#### *Ethical considerations*

The study received human ethics approval from the author's home university as well as from the University of Queensland where the interviews were conducted. To assure participants' anonymity their real names were replaced with pseudonyms in the transcripts.

## **4. Findings**

The overall results of the interview study not only confirm the three motivational factors identified in the 2005 questionnaire survey (see section 2), but also provide a greater insight into the students' perspective of them. However, as one of the interviewees states: "there's more to it" [Matthew Interview 13/Section 18]. The content analysis of



the sixteen interviews has revealed new motives such as perceiving the knowledge of German (or a second language in general) as part of one's identity (*Ideal L2 Self*), a strong affinity with European culture with several respondents expressing the wish to move to Europe once they have finished university, and considering a proficiency in German as an advantageous add-on to the students' primary degree subjects.

The following presentation of the interview study's main results will first, where possible, match the motives as expressed in the interviews to their corresponding factor from the 2005 questionnaire survey (Schmidt 2011). New motives identified in the 2013 interviews will then be explored in the second part of this section.

#### **4.1 The three motivational factors from the 2005 questionnaire survey as expressed in the interviews**

##### **4.1.1 Factor 1: A general interest in the German language and culture paired with a joy and an appreciation of learning languages**

###### *Attitudes towards Germany*

All interviewees expressed positive attitudes towards Germany<sup>1</sup>. Eight of the participants had visited Germany while the other eight had never been to Europe, with some never having left Australia. Those who had been to Germany emphasized how much they had enjoyed their visit. In addition to a general liking of Germany several respondents expressed astonishment at how much Germany, and in particular Berlin, have progressed since unification in 1990:

it's really amazing just the the history and and just and how it's it's really come gone from strength to strength since unification like it's really like a European hub now yes (.) yeah it's just it's really just a great place everything was fine  
John [Interview 11/Segment14]

Some of the eight students who had visited Germany had already learnt German at school. However, those who commenced with German at university without any previous knowledge appear to have been strongly influenced by their positive

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<sup>1</sup> Eight interviewees had visited Germany and also the attitudes expressed by those who had never visited Europe appear to refer mainly to Germany and not to Austria or Switzerland.

experiences in Germany, as Elisabeth' emphatic answer, in which she says twice "absolutely", shows:

I: and so did visiting Germany also influence your decision to do it?  
E: oh absolutely absolutely because like (.) uhm I guess I felt that it was such a beautiful country with such a rich (.) uhm (..) and cultural hi- uhm history  
Elisabeth [4/11-12]

While the positive attitudes towards Germany expressed by those who had visited the country have their roots in real experiences and often refer to modern contemporary German society, it seems that those who had never been to Europe have their attitudes based on either their own imagination, like Melanie's:

when I think about German (.) uhm culture I see like uhm the country they live in or the land they live in and it's really nice and kind of fantastical like it's very beautiful  
Melanie [2/30]

or common stereotypes, as admitted by Patrick himself:

the music and the opera and I suppose almost like your (.) your stereotypical postcard like your Neu Schwansteins and you know your Bavarians and your Prussians and your- you know also a bit of like royalty and like Realpolitik you know battles of old shaping the world encouraging the arts I suppose it's that kind of cliché view  
Patrick [16/16]

### *Interest in German history*

Independent of whether they had visited Germany or not, half of the interviewees commented on being impressed by the overall presence of history in Germany and Europe in general. As John explains this fascination with history seems to come from having grown up in a relatively young nation such as Australia:

being Australian all of Europe is completely mind blowing because you go to a place and there's history you know we are like a hundred so years old there's no history everything's brand new and yeah it's to go to Berlin and just uh you just drown in the history there it's just amazing and it's all there you can see it they haven't tried to cover anything up it's all there  
John [11/14]

This interest in German history appears to have been for some students an important reason for choosing to learn German. It seems that in particular students like Tim who have not been to Europe have a more academic interest in German culture when compared with those who had visited Germany:

I've always been fascinated by uhm particularly 20<sup>th</sup> century German history and I feel like I can't quite uhm truly understand unless I have some knowledge of the language itself  
Tim [15/24]

### *Feelings towards German-speaking people*

In line with the overall positive attitudes towards Germany the eight who had visited the country all reported on their positive encounters with Germans, sometimes noting that they had not expected such a degree of friendliness and openness:

it was so warm and I wasn't really expecting that like [...] you know there's almost the aspect of like uhm Europe people don't really think of Germany so they probably go more to the uhm like Southern Europe as being the sort of like overly friendly culture but definitely German Germany was like that I just found that everyone was so helpful and uhm just really fun loving you know they they are looking for a good time and and (.) yeah I enjoyed that about the culture just everyone being (..) very open and friendly as such  
John [11/18]

One attribute that appears to impress young Australians and that was mentioned several times is that young Germans speak other languages. Matthew, for example, who has never been to Germany but met some Germans while travelling in Asia, states:

I particularly liked the idea I know it's not particularly related to culture but is in a way that a lot of them spoke a number of languages and being in Australia we don't speak many (.) relative to other countries  
Matthew [13/26]

### *Intrinsic reasons*

The second aspect of the first and most dominant motivational factor that was found in the 2005 questionnaire data relates to intrinsic motivation, i.e. the learner finds enjoyment and pleasure in the process of learning German itself (cf. Dörnyei & Ushioda 2011: 23). All sixteen interviews contain positive references with regard to the activity of learning German, sometimes with a focus on the linguistic side, sometimes with a focus on learning in general. One of the most explicit remarks comes from Bianca:

I might be a little bit different in that I just really enjoy it like I just love learning German  
hehe \$I'm a freak\$  
Bianca [12/20]

The underlined words show where Bianca spoke with emphasis while the laughter at the end as well as calling herself a “freak” demonstrate that she considers her passion for learning German as a bit unusual. Students like Bianca appeared during the interviews

to be very keen to speak about their enjoyment of learning German and seemed to appreciate the researcher's interest in their love for German. One reason for this might be that they do not always feel understood with regard to their interest in German and German-speaking culture. Patrick, who is an active member of the German club, was rather frustrated when telling about his experience with exchange students from Germany:

even Germans find it curious that Australians would want to learn German [...] they think we are bizarre (.) [...] and why would we want to you know get together and watch German movies and go and eat German food they find that really quaint in a way [...] they just seem to find it hilarious that Australians would not only learn it but be interested in it in Germany and you know (.) Germanness as a whole  
Patrick [16/36, 38]

What students specifically enjoy about learning German ranges from the social atmosphere of the language classroom, an aspect that was also listed as an additional reason in 2005 (Schmidt 2011: 126):

it's like really difficult to learn a language without you know getting to know the people in your class quite well (.) so that's another aspect of it I suppose that I enjoy  
Elisabeth [4/46]

to a more linguistic interest:

I enjoy (.) uhm I enjoy the detail (.) if that makes sense like getting in and like finding out like if I see something written in German and being able to decrypt it and I put it into English it actually gives me some sort of joy so even in my day to day life if I see German I I enjoy being able to translate it into English  
James [5/48]

In addition to James, six other students expressed a fascination with translation issues and grammatical features such as verb order or grammatical gender which, given that only one of the sixteen students was a linguistics student, came as a surprise. Of the seven interviewees who explicitly expressed a linguistic interest six were male.

The data further reveals that for some students the intrinsic motivation does not necessarily have its roots in specifically learning German but appears to be broader, i.e. students enjoy learning in general, as stated by Daniel and Matthew:

I just have a thirst for knowledge I like (.) I like uhm learning things (.) and remembering them and yeah being able to kind of (..) uh use use that new knowledge  
Daniel [3/20]

I wanted to learn another language (.) I guess as a cognitive sort of (.) you know an extension and something to challenge me and something different uhm I like learning  
Matthew [13/2]

Daniel and Matthew both express an expectation of being intellectually challenged in their German classes, an aspect which Busse & Walter (2013: 446) in their study of university students learning German in the UK conclude is pivotal to sustaining intrinsic motivation.

The interviews confirm further the 2005 result that a positive attitude towards learning German at university often relates to a positive experience at school. However several students commented on their negative experience of learning German, or languages in general, at school. Their dissatisfaction relates mainly to not having progressed beyond learning nouns and very basic phrases, to learning German through distance education, and to a lack of choice with regard to which language to learn. It appears that independent of their experience interviewees felt that their previous learning of German would give them a “head start” [Tom 1/56]. It seems also that those students who felt that they did not learn enough at school continued at university to “learn it properly before [...] learning another language” [Patrick 16/2].

### *The language and culture nexus*

The first motivational factor refers to the German language as well as to German culture, suggesting a strong connection between the two. As the analysis has so far revealed the motivational themes that have emerged in the sixteen interviews also include linguistic references as well as attitudes towards German culture. When asked specifically how they would describe the relationship between language and culture the participants demonstrated a high level of awareness of how language and culture are inseparable, as this statement from Tim summarises:

I feel that language is as much culture as culture is language uhm because it's (.) uhm (.) it's how we communicate aspects of our identity uhm (...) and I feel that language contains these sort of uhm (..) it's sort of like this catalogue of how a culture has changed and how it is now [...] I definitely think there is that strong connection uhm (..) between language and culture because uhm (..) without language culture cannot exist  
Tim [15/22]

#### **4.1.2 Factor 2: A wish to communicate in a German-speaking country while working, studying or travelling**

##### *Travel motive*

The second motivational factor established in the 2005 study reflects a strong desire to be able to communicate when meeting speakers of German overseas. The data analysis of the sixteen interviews has confirmed this factor and revealed a very strong (touristic) travel motive. Nearly all interviewees had plans to travel to Germany and the rest of Europe and as Alexandra states the wish to travel through Europe appears to be for many a main reason for studying a language:

a lot of the other students aren't (.) aren't necessarily language students uh they just take a first year language as an elective uhm it gives them a little bit of an understanding of the language and then often they want to travel to a country that speaks it so it's it's a great opportunity to start and not not come off the uhm aeroplane and have no idea what anyone is saying  
Alexandra [8/18]

Despite being native speakers of English, which can be used as a lingua franca in most parts of Europe, several students referred to language skills as boosting their level of confidence and empowering them when travelling:

so I can go back to Germany and I can be more confident  
James [5/2]

being able to go into a country and understand at least a little bit of what they're saying is hugely empowering you know you can you can think I am so far away from home but I know what is going on here  
Anna [6/78]

While a desire for travelling is common to young people from most countries it appears to be a particularly strong characteristic for young Australians. A number of respondents referred to Australia's geographical isolation which, according to Patrick, increases the interest in other cultures and languages:

this idea of far flung places I mean (.) Australia is far from everywhere (.) so everywhere's anything you can really grasp to do with another country's culture or language is always going to be interesting  
Patrick [16/58]

##### *Overseas study*

In addition to these touristic motives participants also revealed study or work-related travel plans. Australian university students are often limited to other English-speaking

countries when going on exchange, and knowing another language broadens their educational choices as Tim acknowledges:

it opens up more options in terms of studying overseas  
Tim [15/14]

#### *Working overseas*

At least ten students stated that they would like to live and work in Europe at some stage in their life, for example Matthew:

there is an idea of engineering I I thought it would be fantastic to work in Germany as an engineer  
Matthew [13/18]

### **4.1.3 Factor 3: German being considered as an important (business) language that could bring professional advantages**

#### *German as an add-on qualification*

For those who plan to work in Germany the motivation to learn German is obvious. However the interviews also revealed a more general work-related motivational theme. In contrast to the 2005 questionnaire survey where career-related motives did not transpire as strong motives for learning German, those students interviewed in 2013 expressed high expectations that a knowledge of German might be beneficial for their future career in general. As the variety of the degrees studied by the students reflects, none of the students plans a career which requires German as an essential qualification, e.g. a teacher of German. However more than half of the sixteen interviewees made explicit references with regard to career advantages with the majority emphasising that knowing German might give them an advantage when applying for jobs:

I chose to do German with the diploma on top and it gives me extra things [...] I'm hoping that'll yeah help with everything and it's always something I can hold over everybody else  
Sam [10/2, 46]

it's always good to have a second language I think it gives you a bit of an edge careerwise [...] we're always told that uhm the employers will be looking for something that sets you apart from everyone around you  
Bianca [12/14, 16]

if I know some German that will definitely boost me up and (.) put me in front of a few other people in line for jobs  
James [5/36]

#### *Germany's economic power*

One possible explanation for the stronger display of career-related motives is that due to the current Euro crisis Germany and its economic power have received a lot of media attention in Australia. James, for example, comments on Germany's role in the EU and draws a direct connection to his choice of German:

when I learn a language I'd learn German because it's so (.) so prevalent in the European business world they are kind of running of the EU at the moment  
James [5/38]

#### *Complementing other subjects*

While the view of German as an add-on qualification that might come "handy", an expression used by several of the interviewees, is very broad and not specifically linked to the students' degrees, several students stated that they chose German because they saw a logical connection to their primary subject. The subjects students referred to were mainly science subjects such as physics, psychology or engineering, but also comparative literature. Sam's response illustrates how his wish to study physics influenced his decision to learn German:

I up until about year uh twelve I wanted to be an astrophysicist so I thought well that it would be something handy because most of the physics physics sort of stuff happens in Germany anyway and all the stuff comes in and out of Germany  
Sam [10/50]

## **4.2 New motivational themes identified in the interviews**

As shown above the content analysis of the sixteen interviews has provided a deeper understanding of the three motivational factors that were found in the 2005 data. Australian students learning German at university have an interest in German-speaking culture and history, have positive attitudes towards speakers of German, enjoy learning the language, want to travel to Germany and the rest of Europe, and they think that a language "will look good on a resume" [James 5/38]. However, the interview data also suggests that there are other motives that influence students in their choice.



### *Ideal L2 Self*

Several students mentioned that learning another language was something they “always” wanted to do, indicating that it was more than a spontaneous idea that only recently emerged when thinking about university subjects. There is strong evidence in the interviews that participants consider speaking another language as part of the vision they have of themselves, which is in line with Dörnyei’s “Ideal L2 Self” (see section 2). Matthew, for example, who was earlier quoted as wanting to work as an engineer in Germany, states that he would “need more than that” to sustain his motivation and that engineering was only an initial trigger:

but uhm you know I’d need more than that to devote a large amount of time so that’s where the interest came from but there’s more to it  
Matthew [13/18]

As he continues, it appears that he feels that learning another language impacts on his personal development and since he states that learning another language *changes* a person one can assume that this refers to how he sees himself in the future (*Ideal L2 Self*):

I definitely think that learning another language uhm would change you in some respects I’m not sure whether that’s uhm in your thought processes or in your personality or something but it’s a very big thing I mean language defines how we interact definitely  
Matthew [13/28]

That this personal development is seen by the students in a positive light is reflected in the following comments:

it’s something I’m interested in (.) so I suppose that kind of (.) makes me feel better about myself  
Patrick [16/30]

you \$feel like a more intelligent person\$ if you can express yourself in (.) more than your own language  
Bianca [12/26]

it personally makes me feel more full and like my time has been better spent (.) you know (.) it’s just kind of a personal growth kind of thing (.) [...] so that maybe (.) I’m a more interesting person at the end of the day hehe you know maybe that little quirk of mine is oh I am and I speak German  
Tom [1/22]

Tom’s statement contains the strongest evidence of the *Ideal L2 Self*. It expresses his vision of himself in the future (“at the end of the day”) and how he imagines that the

person he will be (“I am”) will be inseparable from his ability to speak German (“and I speak German”): “I am and I speak German”.

*Preference for European languages over Asian languages*

In the light of the current debate about the white paper on *Australia in the Asian Century* (Commonwealth of Australia 2012) one question aimed to explore why participants had chosen a European language, like German, over an Asian language. The responses reveal that students are aware they are going against political and economic trends, with some even feeling “guilty” about their language choice:

I've always felt guilty about I didn't have an interest in in learning an Asian language because we are quite quite geographically wise part of Asia uhm but I've always had a sort of connection to Europe uhm heritagewise and but now also uhm academically uhm because I'm studying English literature  
Tim [15/86]

Several students had studied an Asian language, mainly Japanese and Mandarin, at school which they perceived as very difficult to learn, particularly due to the different characters. Not surprisingly, students stated that they find German easier because of the similarities between English and German. Comments such as the following by Tom reveal the challenge the Australian government faces in encouraging more Australian students, secondary and tertiary, to learn Asian languages:

if you look at a Chinese character (.) it's a lot of people will just call it too hard and even though we're moving into this you know Asian century or whatever uhm I think a lot of people won't have the motivation to learn it like they might think oh well you know our countries are very close and all that but (.) they'll just put it in the too hard basket  
Tom [1/30]

The level of difficulty, however, does not appear to be the main reason for choosing a European language instead of an Asian language. Several students, like James, expressed a close affinity with European culture:

it's more of a culture thing so I enjoy the European culture more than an Asian culture (.) uh it- it's something I've grown up believing and I- I've travelled through Asia I've travelled through Europe and I know where I'd rather live I would much rather live in Europe having (.) European lifestyle  
James [5/66]

The interviewees seem to have various reasons for their identification with European culture. Some point to Australia being a nation of immigrants drawn from around the world, and not just from Asia, while others, for example James, might have been

influenced by travelling when they compare lifestyles and their ease in making friends. But not all students commented on personal experiences. The interview data shows that students are rather critical of the narrow-mindedness of politicians. The following statement by Bianca [12/32] demonstrates well that she is aware of the fact that building up language proficiency takes longer than an election cycle:

I think you can't (.) uh you can't really (..) put all your eggs in one basket if that's the term uhm (..) because eventually things are going to change and perhaps Australia's uhm relationship with Europe is going to be on the fore front again and it takes so long to learn a language that you need to have sort of reserves  
Bianca [12/32]

## 5. Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the motivation of Australian university students to choose German as one of their university subjects. In particular, the study sought to explore whether new qualitative data confirm, explain, complement and expand the motivational factors that were found in an earlier quantitative study with a similar focus (Schmidt 2011). Several participants in the new interview study confirmed Busse & Walter's (2013: 435-436) observation that for native speakers of English it is more difficult to find the motivation to learn another language. Based on this, it appears that choosing to study another language at university in an English-speaking country, such as Australia, is a "conscious decision" [Daniel 3/48] which students do not take impetuously. It is at this deeper level of motivation where the qualitative data of this study has provided greater insights into students' deliberations.

Despite having, as native speakers of English, few compelling incentives to learn another language, the qualitative data has confirmed that students have a wide range of reasons to learn German. This diversity of motives is in line with earlier studies by Ammon (1991) and Schmidt (2011). Interviewees expressed a high level of intrinsic motivation, positive attitudes towards German-speaking culture and speakers of German, and a desire to travel. The strong affinity with German-speaking culture corresponds with Riemer's (2011: 336) observation that an interest in German culture and literature as well as positive attitudes towards Germany are particularly strong motives for studying German in countries that are geographically remote from

Germany. A high level of intrinsic motivation was also found by Busse & Williams (2010) in their longitudinal study on the motivation of university students in the UK to learn German. This suggests that intrinsic motivation plays a major role in countries with English as the dominant language. In the context of intrinsic motivation it is important to remember that only one student in the study was required to learn a language by his degree, and he could have chosen a language other than German. This aspect of self-determination has been widely recognised as a significant factor with regard to someone's intrinsic motivation (cf. Deci & Ryan 1985).

With regard to instrumental reasons, as defined in the Gardnerian tradition, one central theme that has emerged from the interviews is that students consider the ability to speak German as complementing and adding value to other qualifications. This is in agreement with the above comments related to English-speaking countries. Since they already speak a global language they do not see another language as "essential" but as something that is "always good to have" [Ben 7/74]. This is in line with Riemer's (2006: 54) above mentioned "Exotenmotiv" which refers to students thinking that knowing German makes them special in their area of expertise and lets them stand out. Busse & Williams (2010: 81) argue similarly that this "sense of doing something 'special'" is typical for language learners in English-speaking countries where language skills are a "rare commodity".

Moreover, the analysis of the sixteen interviews has shown that despite having an affinity with German-speaking culture, enjoying learning German, wanting to travel and seeing some career-related advantages, "there's more to it" [Matthew 13/18]. This "more" appears to be rather personal and rooted in the students' vision of themselves, corresponding with Dörnyei's motivational concept of the *Ideal L2 Self*. Tom [1/56, 14], for example, repeated several times that learning German is "something personal" and "it's just for my own". He had visited Germany before and wants to go back, but his motivation extends well beyond learning some phrases in German for his next journey. He talked a lot about learning German as a "kind of personal growth" issue and how he sees it as a "personal challenge". Students like Tom indicate that their motivation to learn German is not influenced by current economic trends – "if it was more for employment I would have done better doing Chinese or something" [Tom 1/14] - but follows deeper beliefs.

The interviewees expressed a high level of awareness with regard to the relationship between language and culture. While within university language programs there is sometimes a division between the two, language courses on the one side and thematic courses on the other, students themselves see language and culture as “interwoven” [Alexandra 8/12].

## 6. Conclusion

The new qualitative data has shown the benefits of mixed methods approaches by expanding the 2005 quantitative study on the motivation of Australian university students to learn German (Schmidt 2011). While the questionnaire survey provided results that could be generalised and inform curriculum design, the new data has added a deeper level of understanding as to why students choose German as one of their university subjects. The insights into students’ personal motives have uncovered that there is often “more to it” than having a general interest in German-speaking people and their culture, enjoying the learning process, wanting to travel to Germany, or seeing career advantages. While these three motivational factors are still existent in the interview data, the new data suggests that personal growth is a strong element in students’ motivation and should be reflected in the curriculum.

Furthermore, the new data has revealed that students consider learning German as adding value to their primary degree subjects. As this was mentioned by a number of participants the importance of this motive should be utilised for student recruitment by emphasising that speaking another language and having knowledge of another culture sets you apart from other candidates when applying for jobs.

As mentioned earlier the interviews were conducted in the fourth and fifth week of the first semester, a good time to investigate the initial motivation that had brought students in the language classroom. However, Busse & Walter’s (2013) longitudinal study of university students learning German in the UK suggests that students’ intrinsic motivation decreased with time. Since intrinsic motivation transpired in this study as a strong motivation future research should analyse its dynamics over time.

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## Appendix A: Participants

	Name	Gender	Age	Level	Degree	German Heritage
1	Tom	male	28	beginners	Science	no
2	Melanie	female	18	beginners	Arts	maybe
3	Daniel	male	21	beginners	Management/ Psychology	no
4	Elisabeth	female	21	intermediate	Maths	no
5	James	male	21	beginners	Commerce	no

6	Anna	female	21	beginners	Languages/ Linguistics	yes
7	Ben*	male	22	beginners	Sports Studies	no
8	Alexandra	female	23	beginners	Science	no
9	Joshua	male	22	beginners	Science	yes
10	Sam	male	21	beginners	International Relations/Economics	no
11	John	male	23	beginners	Science	no
12	Bianca	female	18	intermediate	Arts	no
13	Matthew	male	18	beginners	Arts/Science	no
14	Sarah	female	18	intermediate	Arts/Laws	no
15	Tim	male	20	beginners	Arts	yes
16	Patrick	male	18	intermediate	International Studies**	no

\* Ben was the only international student.

\*\* The Bachelor of International Studies requires a compulsory language major.

## **Appendix B: Interview guide**

- Could you just talk me through your reasons for studying German?
- Do you have any other reasons for studying German?
- Did you learn German already at school?
- If yes, could you please tell me a bit about your experience and whether it has influenced your decision to continue at uni?
- Could you explain a bit what you hope to gain from studying German at university level?
- Are your reasons for studying German linked to any long-term plans that you might have?
- Did job considerations play a role for you?
- Do you envisage using German in the future?
- Have you ever visited a German-speaking country?
- If yes, could you tell me a bit what you did over there and how your experience was?
- A former survey revealed that Australian university students learning German are interested in German-speaking people and their culture. Could you please talk me through what comes to your mind when you think of German-speaking people and their culture?
- In your German classes, what would you like to learn about German-speaking people and their culture?



- This might be a bit difficult, but do you have a picture or a sort of vision of yourself with regard to German?
- Australia's neighbouring countries are mainly Asian and the Government has recently released a white paper on *Australia in the Asian Century*. Where do you see the role of European languages such as German in Australia?
- The former survey also revealed that Australian university students learning German believe that learning German broadens their world view. Do you agree?
- If yes, in what way?
- How would you describe the relationship between language and culture?
- Is there anything else you wish to add?

### Appendix C: Transcription symbols

(.)	pause, dots indicate length
-	cut-off of the prior word or sound
<u>emphasis</u>	underlining shows speaker emphasis
hehe	laughter without words
\$laughter\$	words between the \$ signs spoken in a laughing voice
(guess)	transcriber guessed the word(s)

### Biographical details

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### Keywords

German Studies, language learning motivation, German in Australia, mixed-methods research