



Foreign &
Commonwealth
Office

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25 September 2017

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT 2000 REQUEST REF: 0820-17

Thank you for your email of 30 August asking for information under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) 2000. You asked:

I would like to request the following information under the Freedom of Information Act:

- *The total number of employees of the FCO who are also Mandarin Chinese speakers.*
- *If possible, a breakdown in number of speakers at each level of competence.*
- *The standard length of time permitted/allocated by the FCO to a member of staff undertaking Chinese Mandarin language training.*
- *The estimated cost/internal budget allocation to the FCO of providing this training to a single member of staff (excluding the salary of the person being trained).*
- *The percentage rate of those who are given language training who fail to meet the required standard within the allocated time. If it is possible, please provide a separate figure for the Mandarin training failure rate.*
- *The numbers of people who take the FCO Aptitude for Modern Languages test each year, along with the number or percentage of people who fail this test.*

Please would you also be able to provide an update to FOI request 0768-14 (published 8th October 2014), with current information, particularly with regards to Mandarin Chinese.

If you do need to clarify anything regarding my request, please feel free to contact me directly via this email address.

I am writing to confirm that we have now completed the search for the information which you requested.

I can confirm that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) does hold information relevant to your request.

Language skills remain a priority for the FCO: the ability to communicate with others in their own language is vital to the FCO's delivery of the Government's foreign policy priorities and enables diplomats to connect and do business around the world.

As you know, Mandarin is one of our priority languages. According to our HR information management systems, there are 79 officers with a recorded skill level in Mandarin in line with the CEFR framework. Of those officers there are 49 who have a valid C1 or C2 exam pass. Exam passes are valid for five years after the date the exam was taken.

All officers appointed into speaker slots overseas will undertake full time language training to reach C1 Operational level in the language of that country. For China, officers receive 22 months of full time language training from beginner to C1 level. Mandarin students spend around one year of that time studying in the UK before going overseas to complete the remainder of their training. The cost of Mandarin language training is approximately £36,500 per student (excluding salary costs)

You asked for figures to illustrate the rate of success for officers receiving full time language training. As of July 2017, 57% of officers had reached the target level in all languages. This figure increases to 68% when looking at Mandarin specifically. The remaining 32% have yet to successfully complete language training and pass the target level exam.

The Modern Languages Aptitude Test (MLAT) is one of the tools used to assess an officer's ability to learn a language and is of particular relevance for hard languages such as Mandarin. There are approximately 200 officers who sit the MLAT each year. The MLAT is not designed to be a pass and fail system; rather officers are graded from A to D according to their score. Officers who receive grade A are considered to have a strong potential to learn a foreign language. Officers who receive the lowest grade D would be deemed unlikely to have potential to learn a hard language and may even take longer than average to learn a Western European language.

In your request, you asked for an update to a previous FOI request submitted in September 2014.

You will find the number for the UK based FCO staff headcount as at 31 March 2017 in the FCO Annual Report and Accounts 2016-17 (page 62), which is available to you using this link:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/625651/FCO-annual-report-2017-web-accessible.pdf . Therefore, this information is exempt under section 21 of the FOIA – Information accessible to the applicant by other means.

The figure will be updated and published on www.gov.uk next year in the FCO Annual Report and Accounts 2017-18. Therefore, this information is exempt under section 22 of the FOIA – Information intended for future publication.

According to our HR information management system, 892 officers have self declared some level of skill in at least one additional language other than English. The figure for Mandarin is set out previously in this response. It is worth noting that officers are not obliged to include this information on their record and so in reality, the number of officers who do speak at least one additional language may in fact be higher.

I am unable to provide an update to the table included in the response from 2014. The resources required to do so would exceed the guidelines set out in the Freedom of Information Act. If you would like to have this table updated, you may want to submit another FOI request asking specifically for this information.

Yours sincerely,

Diplomatic Academy



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