Overall the study shows that 46 per cent of undergraduate students studying foreign languages are from a high socio-economic background, while 11.7 per cent are from a more disadvantaged background.

By ERICA CERVINI

11:00PM NOVEMBER 27, 2018

Poorer students and those from regional areas are dramatically under-represented in foreign language enrolments at university, despite languages becoming central to university globalisation strategies, a study says.

The study found that students from low socio-economic backgrounds, who tend to have lower ATARs, often enrol at less wealthy universities that offer only a limited number of foreign languages.

However students with high ATARs, who tend to be from more privileged backgrounds, dominate the study of languages. Many enrol at Group of Eight universities, which teach more than 58 per cent of all language study.

“Higher ATARs enable students from advantaged backgrounds to dominate the nation’s most selective (Group of Eight) universities, which in turn offer a wide range of LOTE (languages other than English) courses,” the study says.
Overall the study shows that 46 per cent of undergraduate students studying foreign languages are from a high socio-economic background, while 11.7 per cent are from a more disadvantaged background. Other figures show almost 10 per cent of students at Group of Eight universities study foreign languages compared with less than 3 per cent of students at all other university groupings.

Regional students also have fewer opportunities to study languages. Less than 2 per cent do foreign languages at regional universities, partly because these universities have only a limited number of languages and some do not offer them at all.

The study suggests another reason students tend not to study languages at university is because they have had little exposure to them at school. The better resourced a school is, the greater the chance it can offer a range of languages.

“Our own student survey data shows that students from low SES backgrounds tend to be over-represented in disadvantaged schools with limited LOTE subject options,” the study says.

Students at better-resourced schools often have opportunities to go on school language tours overseas. This experience exposes students to the advantages of studying foreign languages.

The study is reported in a new paper, Access to Languages Other Than English in Australian Universities: An Educational Pipeline of Privilege, in the journal *Higher Education Research and Development*.

Tebeje Molla, the paper’s lead author, told *The Australian* that learning languages in an era of globalisation was becoming increasingly important for students. This was because Australia was in a region where most people did not speak English as their first language.

A graduate with a business degree combined with Chinese would be at an advantage to secure work overseas, Dr Molla said.

However Dr Molla, a postdoctoral fellow at Deakin University, said the impact of learning languages went beyond the economic benefits.

He said taking up languages and understanding cultures were beneficial for society.

“Australia is becoming increasingly a multicultural and multilingual society so having more than one language contributes to social cohesion,” he said.