

UCML Executive

Friday, 26th May, 2023

Report from the Vice Chair Education (Languages and Intercultural Studies)

This brief report reviews activities since the last meeting and highlights some interesting sources of Language related data.

1. The UK Languages landscape

1.1 Trends in Languages

The January plenary report reported on OfQUAL's summary of the 2022 GCSE results for England in a year when the results for GCSE French and German reflected adjustments required by Ofqual to better align grade standards with Spanish. This revealed an interesting difference between languages in the percentage getting top grades in the three most commonly taught languages (pre-pandemic percentages for 2019 in brackets - **50.1% (36.4%) of all students got A or above for French, 58.0% (40.4%) of all students get A or above for German and 50.6% (34.9%) for Spanish**. It is interesting to reflect on the reason for the higher numbers getting top grades in German.

A-Levels

There are other interesting data sources which help to identify any changing patterns in the take-up Languages at school level. The FFT Education Datalab¹, in particular produces some interesting reports. One such report (17th August 2022) looks at the patterns in numbers taking A-level subjects each year between 2001 and 2022 for all those subjects which had at least 1,000 entries² in 2021. This to some extent shows the change in popularity in different subjects. Charts in the appendices show Languages in relation to other subjects for 2001 and 2022 with **Spanish (8,496), French (7,347), Music (5268) and Other Modern Languages (5171) occupying the last 4 places in the chart in 2022 and German with numbers under 1,000 not appearing**. Combining the numbers taking A-level languages in 2022 (21,014), and excluding German, this put Languages as **the 13th popular subject out of 23 - between Geography (33, 947) and Media/ Film /TV studies (18,999)**. In 2001, out of 25 subjects, **French (15, 866) was 13th most popular subject, German (7,864) was 19th, Spanish (4,925) was 23rd and Other Languages (2,170) was in 25th place**. Combining overall numbers for A-level Languages in 2001, **the combined total (30,825) would have put Languages in 9th overall place after Geography (33,268) and before Psychology (30,016)**. Changes in uptake have affected other subject areas with, for example, English ranking first in 2001 with 70,917 entries and 5th in 2022 with 53,233 entries; a drop of 17,594 or 25%. The comparable drop for Languages is around 30% but of course it is worth remembering that patterns of uptake between Languages has varied quite considerably between 2001 and 2022. A (probably quite familiar) chart showing A-level numbers for French, German, Spanish and Other Languages between 2001 and 2022 is also given in the appendices.

¹ <https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/>

² <https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2022/08/which-a-level-subjects-are-the-most-popular/>

A more recent report from Datalab³ (May, 2023) explores reasons for differences in A-Level numbers across subjects by investigating whether A-Level entry requirements are higher for some subjects than others. The report shows, for example, that students taking French and Spanish A-Level tend to have relatively high Attainment 8 scores compared to most other subject areas - French and Spanish rank 5th and 7th respectively out of a list of 30 subjects. Another potential indicator is that French and Spanish is one of a list of subjects that require a relevant GCSE. The report also considers the GCSE grade required in each subject area and concludes that for **STEM subjects and Languages**, at least a Grade 6 is required in the relevant GCSE and that potentially **'it may well be that the entry requirement is a grade 7, but those with a grade 6 are accepted in some circumstances'**. They also conclude that it is fair to assume that grades required for all other subjects are at least a grade 5, which is one grade lower than for STEM subjects and Languages. **The report questions whether schools are justified in setting higher entry requirements for these subject areas and suggests that they are justified given the relatively low chance of achieving good grades in some subjects.** They argue that we should continue to look at the issue of severe grading (even though the issue has partly been addressed recently in the case of Languages), if we want to widen participation in our subject areas and **challenge the perception that some subjects are more difficult than others.**

2. Promoting Languages

2.1 Routes into Languages

There have been a number of activities around Routes into Languages in the last few months

- We had a meeting of the sub-committee in February and will have an open meeting in June with an invitation to any universities involved in Routes activities in the English regions to attend.
- We have had monthly meetings of the 'student ambassadors' sub-group which is aiming to develop a national resource for training ambassadors.
- There have been conversations with the organisers of [Mother Tongue Other Tongue](#) competition organisers based at the Manchester Poetry Library, Manchester Met University. A number of Routes regions are participating in MTOT for the first time. We discussed how we might connect as a group for a 'national celebration of work being done to celebrate multi-lingualism and poetry'. We will discuss this at the June meeting.
- There have also been discussions with the [Translation Exchange](#), based at the University of Oxford discussing synergies and the use of student ambassadors. There have also been several meetings bringing the BA/ SCILT and UCML together to discuss the role of student mentors in promoting languages.
- I presented the work of Routes into Languages, at the *Delivering Excellence in Teaching Modern Foreign Languages in Schools Conference 2023* in March and organised a panel showcasing activities in each of the UK nations at the Durham Modern Languages and Cultures Conference in April. There will be also a presentation on the role of ambassadors in the Language Acts Debate on [Widening Participation and Languages Uptake](#) at KCL on the 1st June.
- We have had initial meetings with National Consortium for Languages Education on how we might support the new DFE-funded Languages Hub initiative, and the soon-to-be appointed Language Hub lead schools.
- We hope that the new simplified Routes website will be populated with relevant resources and information over the summer period.

3. Other activities

3.1 Gender Action

I represent UCML on the Steering Group of the Gender Action initiative. They have recently received an award through the Ignite Partnership (launched by Lewis Hamilton and the Mercedes F1 team) to 'grow participation in its school-charter mark scheme: a whole school approach to promoting gender

³ [Are A-Level entry requirements higher for some subjects than others? - FFT Education Datalab](#)

equity, supporting the participation, attainment and progression of women and girls in STEM subjects’.

Gender Action itself, is committed to a whole school approach, not just in STEM subjects, and it is hoped that this new expansion of the initiative will have some impact on how Languages are represented in schools. A report from Datalab ⁴ in 2021, shows how much a Gender Action approach might be needed if we are to address this imbalance. The report concludes that although there is some indication that gender balance in STEM subjects has generally improved over the last five years, in other subjects it has declined. As for our subject area, **‘apart from ‘other modern languages’ – in which the proportion of female students has fallen slightly from 58% in 2017 to 57% this year – all A-Levels in languages have seen increases in their proportion of female students over the last five years. Spanish, for example, has increased from 66 to 70% female.** A chart showing the gender balance by A-Level subjects in 2021 is given in the Appendix.

3.2 I also represent UCML on the [Learning Through Languages UK](#) Steering Group. LTL has continued to offer its inspiring series of CLIL Mondays online seminars.

VW, May 2023

⁴ <https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2021/09/which-a-level-subjects-have-the-best-and-worst-gender-balance/>

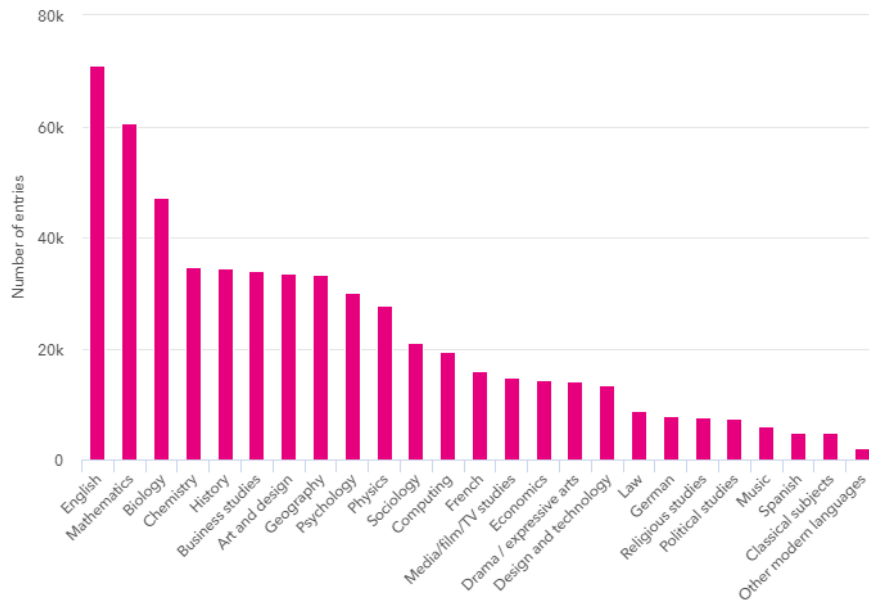
Appendices

Source: Datalab - <https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2022/08/which-a-level-subjects-are-the-most-popular/> and <https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2021/09/which-a-level-subjects-have-the-best-and-worst-gender-balance/>

2001 ▾

A-Level entry numbers by subject, 2001

All students in England

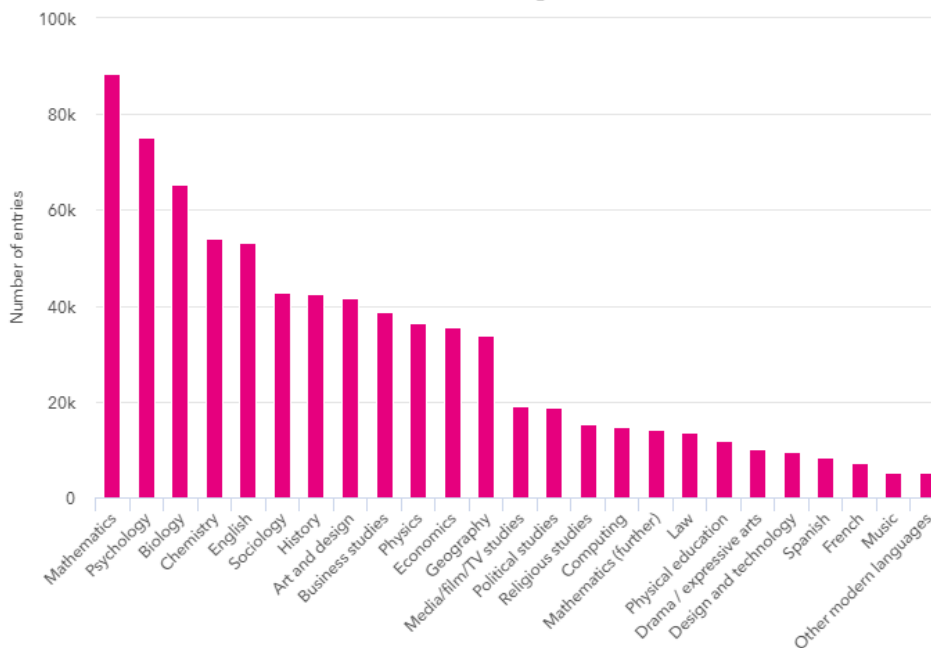


Notes
Source: FFT Education Datalab analysis of JCO data

fft education datalab

A-Level entry numbers by subject, 2022

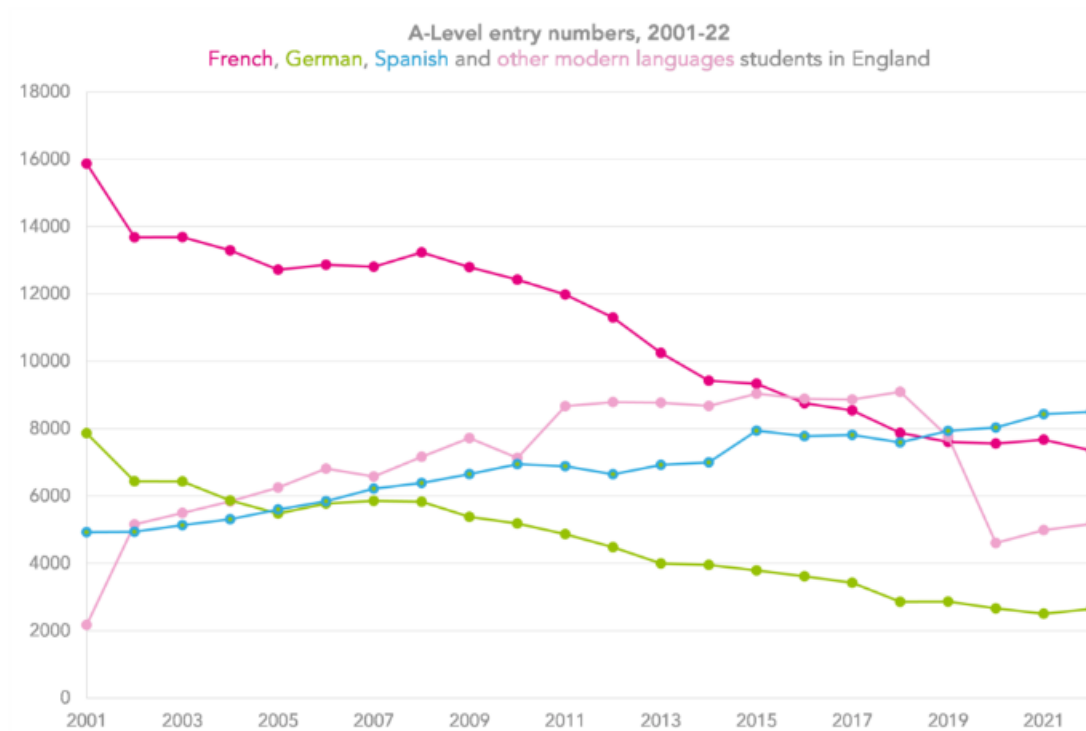
All students in England



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Source: FFT Education Datalab analysis of JCO data

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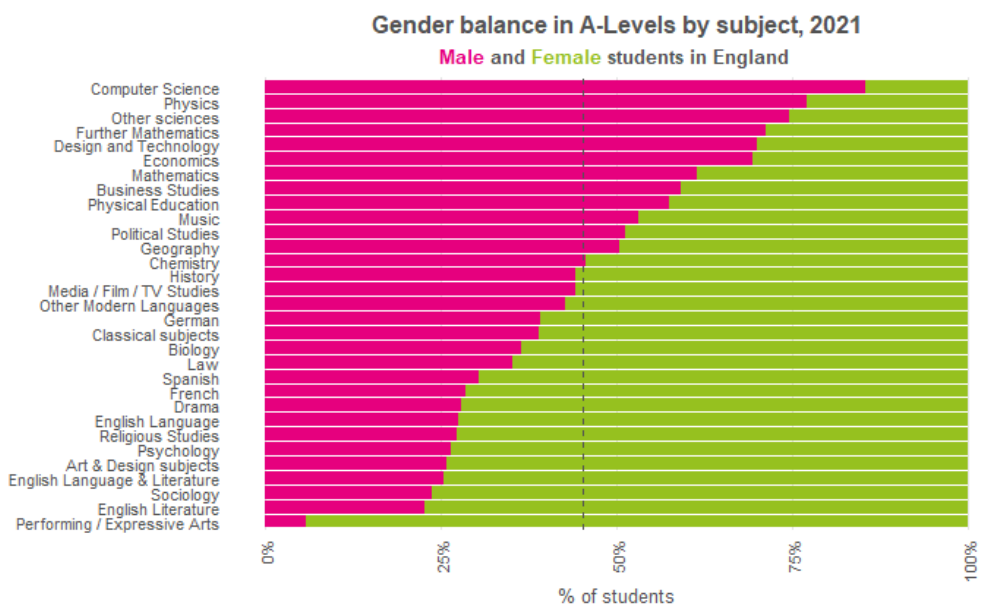
Modern foreign languages



In 2001, French was by far the most popular modern foreign language at A-Level, followed by German. But since 2019, Spanish has been the most popular option. Other modern languages have also increased in popularity since 2001, despite a steep fall in entries between 2018 and 2020.

Gender balance in 2021

The chart below shows the gender balance in all A-Level subjects this year.^[2] Bear in mind that more female than male students sit A-Levels. In 2021, the overall cohort of A-Level students was 55% female. This is indicated on the chart below as a dotted line.



Media / film / TV studies, history and chemistry were all nearly exactly the same as the overall A-Level cohort in terms of gender balance, at 56%, 56% and 54% female respectively.