

Languages still slipping at GCSE

The number of students opting to study modern languages at GCSE continues to slide - with French being the biggest loser - this summer's results reveal.

The number taking French has slumped by a third in four years, although language experts say they hope the trend is now slowing. Results for England, Wales and Northern Ireland also show a big fall in the number of people taking GCSEs overall. That is partly explained by some pupils taking exams early, exam boards say. The joint exam boards - which released the results - say English and maths in particular are being taken early, in Year 10, or in the winter of Year 11, leaving pupils to focus on a smaller group of subjects. This, the exam boards say, can also partly explain the rising proportion of entries getting good grades.

GCSE LANGUAGE ENTRIES 2008

French - down 6.8%

German - down 5.4%

Spanish - up 4.9%

Other modern foreign languages - up 2.9%

Other reasons given for the fall of 158,242 entries in GCSEs this summer include the rise in students taking vocational qualifications and a move towards the International GCSE by some independent schools. There are about 6,000 fewer 16-year-olds this year, due to demographic changes, but the experts say this alone does not explain the drop in entries at GCSE.

The decline in languages has been noticed for several years. The Westminster government stopped it being compulsory to do a language from the age of 14 in 2004. French is still in the top 10 most popular subjects at GCSE - and is by far the most popular foreign language - but there has been a dramatic fall in recent years. Since 2004, there has been a fall of more than 30% in the overall numbers doing French GCSE (down from 318,963 in 2004 to 203,498 this year). German has also continued to fall - from 81,061 in 2007 to 76,695 this year - a drop of 5.4%. In 2004, 122,161 students sat a GCSE in the subject. Spanish, however, has been steadily growing in popularity, but from a lower base. Entries rose by 4.9% on last year - from 63,978 to 67,092.

MOST POPULAR GCSE subjects

1 maths

2 English

3 English literature

4 science

5 additional science

6 design and technology

7 history

8 art

9 geography

10 French

Other modern languages - such as Chinese and Arabic - are also growing in popularity although the totals are comparatively small. A total of 2,712 students took a GCSE in Arabic (up from 2,614 last year) while 3,085 sat Chinese (up from 3,008 last year). The total increase

in numbers taking other modern foreign languages was 888, or 2.9%. CILT, the National Centre for Languages, believes that the downward slide of entries at GCSE might be slowing. Its researchers noted that entries for all languages had seen an overall decline of just 2.9%, compared with 5.8% last year and 10.5% in 2006.

CILT's Dr Anne Davidson Lund said: "The figures suggest a welcome slowing in the downward trend for language take-up at GCSE; what we want to see now is the reversal of that trend.

"It is more important than ever for teenagers to recognise the value of linguistic and intercultural skills.

"Languages compete with a host of other subjects at options time, yet language skills are highly valued by employers in the UK and beyond and give young people a real advantage in the jobs market."

The exam boards said another effect of the reduced numbers opting to study languages, was that the results were higher than average, suggesting that those taking languages were a well-motivated and talented group.

Popular subjects

English and maths remain the subjects taken by the most candidates - and results at grades A* to C were up in both. The proportion of English GCSEs being awarded at those grades rose by 0.7 percentage points (from 62.2% in 2007 to 62.9% this year). For maths, the increase was 1.1 percentage points (up from 55.2% to 56.3%). The other most popular subjects are similar to previous years - English literature, followed by science, additional science, design and technology, history, art, geography and French. There was also movement in science entries. This year the science double award has been abolished and replaced by two separate qualifications, science and additional science. Fewer candidates have taken additional science than previously took the double award, the exam board figures suggest. But there were marked increased entries in the separate sciences, with biology up 35.3% (to 85,521), chemistry up 29.4% (to 76,656) and physics up 29.1% (to 75,383)..

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