

## British Academy briefing: The humanities and social sciences at A level August 2018

The British Academy is the national academy for the humanities and social sciences and monitors the health of these subjects throughout the education system. This briefing paper explores the health of the subjects at A level and looks at the knock-on effect on university-level study, focusing on modern languages, English and other humanities, and the social sciences in turn.

### Modern languages

Language skills will be essential for building new diplomatic and economic relationships after leaving the EU; 71% of UK Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs) told us that future executives will need language skills.<sup>1</sup> Despite political and public recognition of this, and despite the introduction of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) at the GCSE stage, take-up of modern languages at A level continues to fall, especially in French and German. This is having a knock-on effect on university-level study.

- Provisional entries for **German A level** in England in 2018 fell by 16% compared with 2017.<sup>2</sup>
- Provisional entries for **French A level** in England fell by 8% compared with 2017.<sup>3</sup>
- Since 2005, the number of students taking A level German has fallen by 37%.<sup>4</sup>
- While there has been promising growth in the number of A level entries in Spanish and other languages, such as Polish, in recent years, this is not enough to make up for years of sustained decline.

### Impact on higher education

- Between 2007 and 2017 at least **10 modern language departments were closed** at UK higher education institutions and at least **nine more significantly downsized** their undergraduate provision.<sup>5</sup>
- Between 2012-13 and 2016-17, the overall number of students on **undergraduate or postgraduate courses in languages** fell by 13.8%.<sup>6</sup>
- The number of university students taking **French studies** declined by 45% between 2010-11 and 2016-17.<sup>7</sup>
- **German studies** declined by 42.6% in the same period.<sup>8</sup>
- **Italian studies** declined by 62.5% between 2010-11 and 2016-17.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>[Small and Medium-Sized Enterprise language survey](#) as part of *Born Global: A British Academy project on language learning*, British Academy (2016). A [report for the government](#) by researchers from Cardiff University Business School in 2014 also suggested that the shortage of foreign-language skills may be costing the UK 3.5% of GDP.

<sup>2</sup> Data for England from [Provisional entries for GCSE, AS and A level: summer 2018 exam series](#), Ofqual (May 2018)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> [Language Trends 2015/16: Language teaching in primary and secondary schools in England Survey Report](#), British Council (2018).

<sup>5</sup> [The landscape for humanities and social sciences in higher education: the current picture](#), British Academy (May 2018)

<sup>6</sup> HESA Student Full Person Equivalent 2016/17, accessed under license via HeidiPlus, in Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> HESA Student Full Person Equivalent 2016/17, accessed under license via HeidiPlus, in [The landscape for humanities and social sciences in higher education: the current picture](#), British Academy (May 2018).

## English and other humanities

The last year has seen a decline in A level entries for English, English Literature and English Language and Literature, as well as for History, Geography and Religious Studies.

Newly-restructured A levels and new funding arrangements have seen students taking fewer subjects. Students are now most likely to study only three A levels rather than – as it was in the past - starting four AS levels, with the option to drop one subject in their final year. More students are taking exclusively science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects, reducing the take-up of the arts, humanities and social sciences.<sup>10</sup>

This narrower selection of options has implications for the national skillset. The UK's future workforce will require flexible and adaptable graduates with a balance of skills from the arts, humanities and social sciences, as well as STEM.

- The total number of students taking A levels in **English subjects** (English; English Literature; English Language and Literature) has declined by nearly a fifth since the recent peak of entries in 2015.<sup>11</sup>
- The combined number of provisional A level entries for **English subjects** declined by 9% in the last year alone.<sup>12</sup>
- Provisional entries for **Geography A level** in England have fallen 11% since last year.<sup>13</sup>
- Provisional entries for **Religious Studies A level** in England have fallen by 23% since last year.<sup>14</sup>
- Provisional entries for **History A level** in England have fallen by 2% since last year.<sup>15</sup>

### Impact on higher education

- The UCAS category of '**English studies**' has seen a 19.1% decline - equivalent to around 12,000 fewer undergraduate and postgraduate students in 2016-17 compared with 2010-11.<sup>16</sup>
- The number of undergraduate and postgraduate students in the category of '**Historical and philosophical studies**', which includes history, archaeology, philosophy and theology, fell by 13.8% from 2011-12 to 2016-17.<sup>17</sup>

## Social sciences

Social sciences continue to be popular among 16-18-year olds in England, with provisional exam entries for most subjects in this field either stable or increasing. Data from recent years shows a gender divide between students of Economics, of which the majority are male, and those taking Psychology and Sociology, of which the majority are female.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> [Post-16 Qualification and Subject Mix- a Report for The Royal Society](#), D. Thomson & A. Keshwani (2017).

<sup>11</sup> Data for England from [Provisional entries for GCSE, AS and A level: summer 2018 exam series](#), Ofqual (May 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Data for England in Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> HESA data, referenced in [The landscape for humanities and social sciences in higher education: the current picture](#), British Academy (May 2018).

<sup>17</sup> HESA data, referenced in Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> [A, AS and AEA Results Summer 2017](#), Joint Council for Qualifications (August 2017).

- The number of students taking **Economics** A level is up by 3% on last year and has increased by 17% since 2014.<sup>19</sup>
- Around two thirds of entries to Economics A level in England are by men, and one third by women. This proportion has remained stable since 2012-13.<sup>20</sup>
- Entries for **Psychology and Sociology** remain stable this year.<sup>21</sup>
- In both Psychology and Sociology, the proportion of students has remained at about three quarters women and one quarter men since 2012-13.<sup>22</sup>

### Impact on higher education

- First-year enrolment on undergraduate (bachelor's) courses in **Economics** increased by 24% between 2012-13 and 2016-17. Enrolment in economics continues to be male-dominated, with women making up only 32% of first-year entrants in 2016-17.<sup>23</sup>
- First year enrolment on bachelor's courses in **Sociology** increased by 22% between 2012-13 and 2016-17. It is an increasingly female-dominated subject, with women making up 78% of all first-year entrants in 2016-17, up from 73% in 2012-13.<sup>24</sup>
- Other key social science subjects like **Politics, Geography and Anthropology** have all seen notable increases in enrolment in bachelor's programmes over the same period.<sup>25</sup>

### A note on HESA data

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<sup>19</sup> Data for England in [Provisional entries for GCSE, AS and A level: summer 2018 exam series](#), Ofqual (May 2018).

<sup>20</sup> [A, AS and AEA Results Summer 2017](#), Joint Council for Qualifications (August 2017).

<sup>21</sup> Data for England in [Provisional entries for GCSE, AS and A level: summer 2018 exam series](#), Ofqual (May 2018).

<sup>22</sup> [A, AS and AEA Results Summer 2017](#), Joint Council for Qualifications (August 2017).

<sup>23</sup> HESA student record 2016/17 (excluding ITT students), accessed under license via HeidiPlus.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.