
British Academy briefing

Humanities and social sciences A level and GCSE entries

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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 GCSE and A level in England and looks at the knock-on effect on university-level study across the UK.¹

Languages

There has been a drastic and continued decline in the numbers studying languages at secondary school and consequently at university over the last two decades. This is a vicious circle – fewer teachers are trained with the result that it is more difficult to offer high quality provision in schools. Moreover, a recent survey has shown that the language gap between learners from privileged and disadvantaged social backgrounds has become wider: disadvantaged students in England are now even less likely to learn a language than three years ago.²

However, GCSE entry figures for 2019 show some encouraging signs, with a 4% increase in overall take up of languages since last year, although this is still a long way from the Government's target of 90% taking a language (modern or ancient) by 2015. But A level numbers continue to fall, with a 6% decline in take up in 2019 compared to 2018, which has a knock-on effect on university-level study. A recent survey has

¹ Data for A level and GCSE provisional entries is drawn from Ofqual, [Provisional entries for GCSE, AS and A level: summer 2019 exam series](#). This data records entries for summer examinations as of April 2019 and therefore does not include late entries or cases where students do not sit the exam. Nevertheless, the data is a useful guide to overall numbers and trends. This data is for England only.

Unless otherwise stated, data for higher education is taken from the publicly available Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) [student statistics dataset](#), available under a CC-BY-4.0 open data licence. Data for higher education refers to undergraduate number for the whole of the UK.

² British Council (2019) [Language Trends 2019: Language teaching in primary and secondary schools in England](#)

suggested that tough exams might be one reason for this decline.³

- Provisional entries for French GCSE in 2019 increased by 4% compared with 2018.
- Provisional entries for German GCSE are down by 2.5% this year after 3% rise last year.
- Provisional entries for Spanish GCSE in England increased by 10% compared with 2018.
- The total number of entries in languages GCSEs are 10% lower than they were in 2014, though the number of 16 years olds in the population has also fallen in that period.
- Provisional entries for French A level in England decreased by 3% in 2019 compared with 2018.
- Provisional entries for 'other languages' at A level fell by 12% in 2019. This includes qualifications in languages such as Polish, Turkish, Arabic and Urdu, which are a vital and vibrant part of the UK's multicultural and multilingual society.
- Provisional entries for Spanish A level are up 4% this year
- Provisional entries for A level German are up 0.5% this year, after a 16% fall last year.

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.⁴
- Between 2014-15 and 2017-18, the overall number of students on undergraduate courses in languages fell by 12%.
- The number of undergraduate students taking French studies declined by 21% between 2014-15 and 2017-18.
- The number of undergraduate students taking Russian & East European studies fell by 18% in the same period.
- The number of undergraduate students taking courses in non-European languages fell by 12% between 2014-15 and 2017-18.

English and other humanities

The number of A level entries for English, English Language and English Literature has continued to fall in 2019, a trend which began in 2016 and has accelerated in the last two years.

Numbers for Geography and History have increased at both GCSE and A level, but uptake of Religious Studies continues to fall. Numbers for theology and religious studies in higher education are also falling, with the trend seeming to coincide with introduction of higher fees in England in 2012.⁵

The increase in take up of History and Geography is encouraging, given previous evidence that restructured A levels and new funding arrangements had seen students taking fewer, and a narrower range of subjects.⁶ 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.⁷

- Provisional entries for A levels in English subjects (English, English Literature, English Language and Literature) declined by 13% in 2019 compared with 2018. There has been an overall fall of 30% since the recent peak of entries in 2015.

³ British Council (2019) [Language Trends 2019: Language teaching in primary and secondary schools in England](#)

⁴ British Academy (2018) [The landscape for humanities and social sciences in higher education: the current picture](#)

⁵ British Academy (2019) [Theology and Religious Studies provision in UK Higher Education](#)

⁶ Thomson & Keshwani (2017) [Post-16 Qualification and Subject Mix- a Report for The Royal Society](#)

⁷ British Academy (2017) [The Right Skills: celebrating skills in the arts, humanities and social sciences](#)

- Provisional entries for A level Geography rose by 5% and for GCSE by 3% in 2019 compared with 2018.
- Provisional entries for A level and GCSE History both rose by 7% in 2019.
- Provisional entries for religious studies fell by 5% at A level and 4% at GCSE in 2019 compared with 2018.

Impact on higher education

- English Studies undergraduate numbers have fallen 12% between 2014-15 and 2017-18.
- History undergraduate numbers have fallen by 2% in this period but are still 2% higher in 2017-18 than 10 years ago.
- There were around 6,500 fewer students on Theology and Religious Studies courses in higher education institutions in 2017-18 than there were in 2011-12. Enrolment on first degree (bachelor's) programmes in UK universities was 31% lower in 2017-18 compared to its peak in 2011-12.⁸
- Since 2012, student numbers in this subject have declined year-on-year.

Social sciences

Social sciences continue to be popular at A level in England, with provisional entries for most subjects in this field stable or increasing, a trend also reflected in higher education numbers. There continues to be a clear gender divide with the majority of students taking Economics being male and the majority female for Psychology and Sociology.

These subjects are not widely offered at GCSE, although there were around 90,000 provisional entries for business studies and another 45,000 provisional entries for economics and other social sciences.

- The largest increases in provisional entries for A level in 2019 are in political studies (11%), sociology (9%) and psychology (8%) compared to 2018.
- In 2018, 31% of students taking A level Economics were female, compared to 75% for Psychology and 77% for Sociology.⁹

Impact on higher education

- Between 2014-15 and 2017-18 there has been a 17% growth in the number of undergraduates on Economics courses
- In the same period, the number of undergraduates on Politics courses has increased by 22%.
- The number of undergraduates on Sociology courses has increased by 12% between 2014-15 and 2017-18.
- The gender divide is also evident in higher education: in 2017-18, 63% of students on undergraduate social studies courses as a whole (which also includes social policy, social work, geography and anthropology) were female. In business studies, 48% of undergraduates were female.

⁸ British Academy (2019) [Theology and Religious Studies provision in UK Higher Education](#) Data from HESA Student Record 2007/8 – 2017/18 accessed under license via HeidiPlus. Copyright Higher Education Statistics Agency Limited. Neither the Higher Education Statistics Agency Limited nor HESA Services Limited can accept responsibility for any inferences or conclusions derived by third parties from data or other information obtained from Heidi Plus.

⁹ Joint Council for Qualifications (2018) [A Level and AS Results Summer 2018](#)

Creative and performing arts

The UK is world leader in the creative arts. The Creative Industries contributed £87.4bn to the UK economy in 2015 (equivalent to 5%), and between 2010 and 2015 grew by 34%, faster than any other sector.¹⁰ But the exclusion of GCSE qualifications in creative and performing arts from the EBacc performance measure has led to concerns that students are being discouraged from taking these subjects.

The data show that numbers taking art and design, design and technology, drama, music and performing/expressive arts at GCSE have continued to fall since 2014-15. However, the picture is more encouraging in higher education where there has been steady growth across almost all sub fields in within the creative arts and design in the same period.

- Provisional entries for art and design, design and technology, drama, music and performing/expressive arts as a whole fell 3% in 2018 compared to 2019. This is smaller decrease than the 11% decline year on year between 2017 and 2018.
- Total provision entries in these subjects at GCSE for 2019 are 27% lower than in 2014.
- There has also been a decline in provisional entries at A level, but this has been of a smaller scale, with numbers falling 5% between 2018 and 2019, and 17% between 2014 and 2019.

Impact on higher education

- Undergraduate numbers in subjects categorised as ‘creative arts and design’ (which includes dance, drama and music) have increased by 5% between 2014-15 and 2017-18.
- Numbers in almost all sub-categories in this area have either remained steady or shown a small level of growth in this period.

For further information, contact:

Sean Canty, Press Officer, The British Academy

s.canty@thebritishacademy.ac.uk

+44 (0)207 969 5273 / +44 (07)500 010432

Joe Christmas, Media & Public Affairs Executive, The British Academy

j.christmas@thebritishacademy.ac.uk

+44 (0)207 969 5248

¹⁰ DCMS (2018) [DCMS Sectors Economic Estimates 2017](#)