

Language Trends Wales 2020

Introduction

This report presents the latest trends and analysis of language learning uptake at GCSE and A-level in Wales.

In a year that has presented great challenges for every sector, including schools and education, these figures will be published alongside 'Language Trends Wales 2020: The Conversation'; a series of articles and contributions from experts and stakeholders in the field of language learning in Wales. The aim of this is to provide diverse insights and perspectives on ways in which Wales can address the ongoing decline in learner numbers and develop as a beacon of excellence in language learning.

Comparison of these figures with previous years may be problematic due to the impact of Covid-19 on school examinations in 2020. They are nonetheless indicative of longer-term trends and continue to highlight the overall low numbers of learners of languages in education in Wales. Furthermore, as challenges continue to grow for schools amid the pandemic, this has the potential to impact language trends and promotion going forward – a situation that will have to be monitored closely.

Looking at the trends in modern foreign languages (MFL), there has been a 53% reduction in GCSE language entries over the last 10 years and at A-level numbers have dropped by 48% over the same period – and the rate of decline is increasing.

The findings in this report have been collated using data from the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) on GCSE and A-level entries, published in September 2020. The data comprises entries from learners of all ages and from all types of institutions including schools, further education (FE) colleges and adult centres.

Key findings for 2020

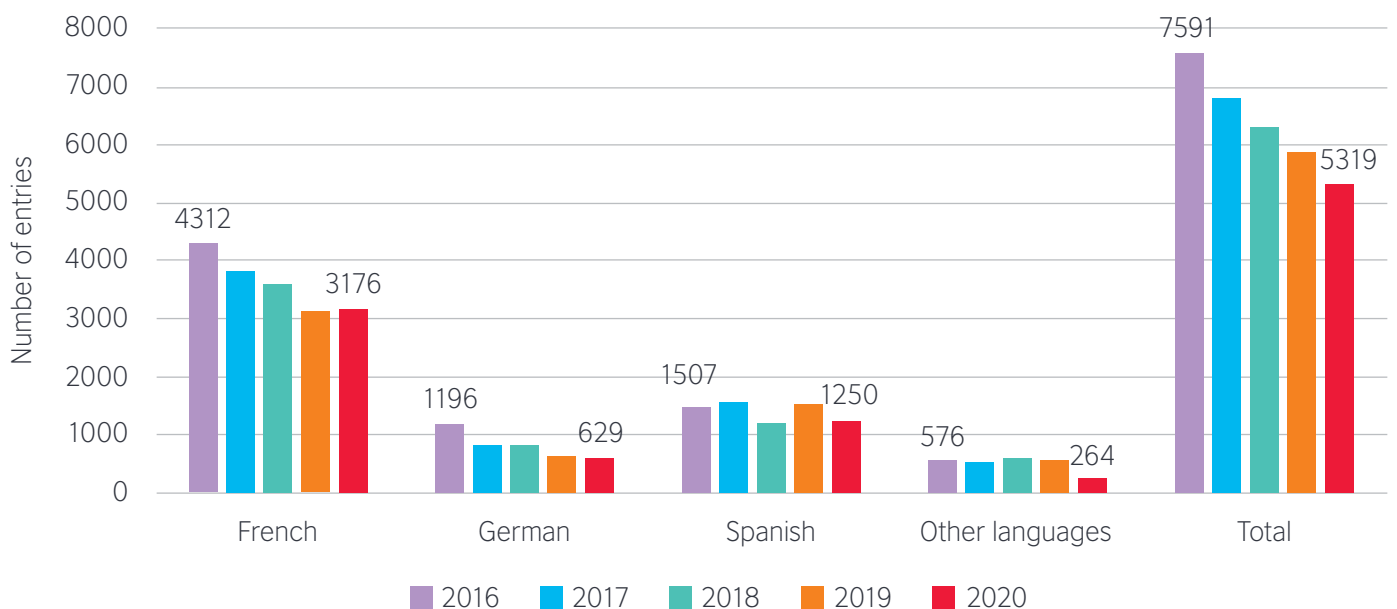
- Pupil entries for modern foreign languages (MFL) continue to fall in Wales with a 10% decrease at GCSE and a 16% decrease at A-level since 2019.
- While numbers for French and German GCSE stabilised slightly, Spanish saw a 19% fall at GCSE and a 15% decrease at A-level compared to last year.
- The largest decrease in entries between 2019-2020 has been for 'other languages' with a fall of 54% and 34% at GCSE and A-level respectively.

Examination data

GCSE entries

The number of GCSE entries for modern foreign language subjects in 2020 has decreased by almost 10% compared to 2019. This follows a year on year trend which has seen numbers fall by 64% since 2002.¹

GCSE entries in MFL, Wales 2016-2020



¹ See [Language Trends Wales 2018](#) (Page 22) for full table of figures from 2002-2018



French, German and Spanish

For the first time since 2002, entries for French at GCSE have seen a small increase of 1.5% between 2019-2020, although the longer-term trend remains one of significant decline. German too has seen the number of entries stabilise slightly, with a decrease of just 0.7%, but uptake remains the lowest out of the three main languages taught.

This slight stabilisation was forecast in last year's Language Trends Wales (2019)² when teachers reported that while 36% of schools had fewer pupils studying MFL in Year 11 than in 2018, 31% of teachers said that they had *more* pupils taking a language, which "may provide some hope that the decline in numbers taking GCSE could be less severe in 2020 than it has been in 2019".

Spanish has seen a 19% decrease in uptake between 2019-2020, in contrast with last year's similarly sized increase. Looking at the five-year trend in Spanish, the fluctuating pattern which is appearing may be a result of alternate cohort teaching (offering Spanish GCSE every other year) which some schools have adopted.

Other languages

By far the largest decline in entries comes in the category of 'other languages', which have seen entries halve since last year. In fact, other languages saw the largest decrease in entries across all subject areas in the UK in 2020.³ Until this year, other languages had been experiencing a slight upward trend in uptake, albeit from a small base.

This category represents 15 different languages including Italian, Chinese, Polish, Arabic and Urdu⁴ which are currently offered as a GCSE in the UK (a breakdown of these language at a Welsh level is not possible due to small numbers). In Wales, most of these languages are not taught formally in schools and therefore it is thought that entries come from further education, adult or community learning. That said, the majority of entries, 87% (90% in 2019), are for individuals aged 16 or under and therefore still representative of pupils in compulsory education. It's possible that the impact of Covid-19 on examinations has had a knock-on effect on entries in this category, where the absence of a teacher or formal learning structure has meant that no teacher-grade can be offered as an alternative to the formal examination.

² [Language Trends Wales 2019](#) (Page 20)

³ JCQ (2020) – 'GCSE, Project, and Entry Level Trends - UK, 2020'

⁴ JCQ (2020) – 'GCSE Other MFL entries 2019-2020'



Impact of Covid-19 on support and mentoring

In 2019's Language Trends Wales report,⁵ the contribution and value of external agencies and programmes providing support and mentoring for MFL through the Welsh Government's Global Futures initiative such as Routes Into Languages Cymru and the MFL Student Mentoring Project was duly acknowledged. It is too early to say what impact Covid-19 might have on teachers being able to continue to access this support as the 2020/21 school year starts.



⁵ Language Trends Wales 2019 (Page 21)

A-level entries

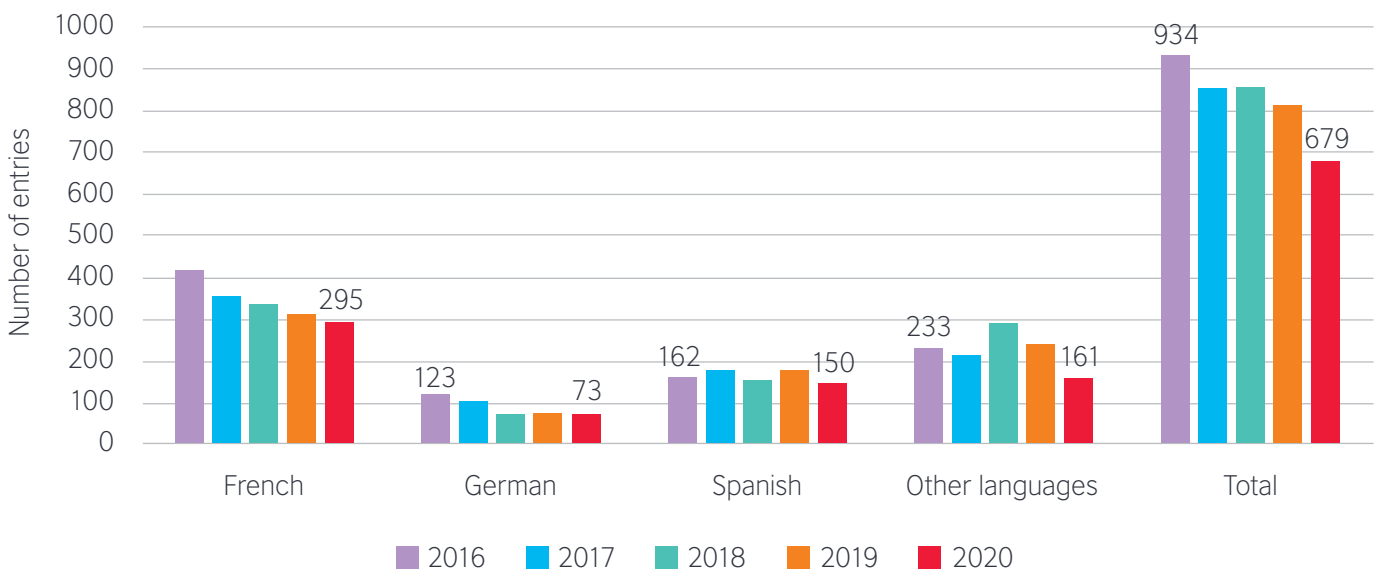
A-level numbers for MFL have also seen a notable decrease this year with 16% fewer entries than in 2019. A small decrease has been recorded across French, German and Spanish, and a larger drop in the 'other languages' category, although low numbers across the board can mean that small fluctuations in actual entries have a seemingly large impact on percentage changes.

French has seen a small 6% decrease in entries between 2019-2020, consistent with the trend over the last four years. However, this sees actual numbers of entries dropping below 300 for the first time. Entries for German have seen a marginal decrease but the trend over the last three years is one of relative stability. Nevertheless, numbers for German remain consistently low, hovering at around 70 entries a year across the whole of Wales.

Spanish entries have also dropped by 15% in 2020, following an increase the previous year. The fluctuating trend in A-level Spanish entries mirrors that of GCSE, perhaps therefore reflecting the pipeline of potential learners coming through.

Like at GCSE, the largest decrease in numbers has occurred in entries to 'other languages' with these falling by 34% between 2019-2020. This has a particular influence on the overall figure for MFL entries and is likely to have experienced a similar effect from Covid-19 to GCSEs.

A-level entries in MFL, Wales 2016-2020



The Future

Language Trends Wales 2019⁶ did offer some evidence that the new curriculum was encouraging closer working between MFL and English and Welsh departments. However, the current focus on English and Welsh meant that teachers were not optimistic about the prospects for MFL. This was disappointing given the huge potential for synergy between the teaching of Welsh, English and international languages and we will continue to monitor this as part of next year's Language Trends Wales.

These results are not surprising in the context of language teaching and learning in the UK. A recent report published by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)⁷ looked for the first time at the time spent on MFL teaching in schools (15-year-olds). Pupils in the UK receive the third-lowest amount of time in language lessons in the OECD countries at just 1.7 hours per week on average – only behind Australia and New Zealand and against an OECD average of 3.6 hours.

However, with the new curriculum will come potential new qualifications, and Qualifications Wales is undertaking a programme of consultation, with stakeholders⁸ - including young people - looking at the kind of qualifications that will be needed.

Previous Language Trends Wales reports indicated that the introduction of new GCSE and A-level courses had reinforced the perception that MFL is a difficult subject only suitable for the most able.⁹ Difficult exams and disappointing results at GCSE, which negatively impacted post-16 take up, were reasons suggested by teachers for declining MFL numbers.

In November 2019, Qualifications Wales announced that they had asked WJEC to review the MFL GCSE specifications following feedback from stakeholders *that the assessment for these qualifications is too demanding and that the breadth and nature of the content is challenging for students.*¹⁰ This mirrored a similar review by Ofqual, which found that there was a sufficiently strong case to adjust grading standards in GCSE French and German in England.

While this is not unexpected, given that the qualifications in Wales have a very similar format to those in England, a new curriculum will need new benchmarking standards – so perhaps Wales could look towards the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which is now not just used in Europe but across the world. Focusing on what pupils can actually do in a language, rather than qualifications, it does not tell teachers what to do, or how to do it, but sets clear standards to be attained at successive stages of language. Most importantly it allows for recognition of language qualifications both nationally and internationally, which Wales will need if and when we move away from qualifications developed with England.



⁶ [Language Trends Wales 2019](#)

⁷ OECD (2020), [PISA 2018 Results \(Volume V\): Effective Policies, Successful Schools](#), PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris,

⁸ Qualifications Wales: [Qualified for the future](#)

⁹ [Language Trends Wales 2019](#)

¹⁰ [Qualifications Wales 2019](#)



Further information

If you have questions about this report, please contact the head of education at British Council Wales, Dr Walter Ariel Brooks, at:

walterariel.brooks@britishcouncil.org