

A-LEVEL RESULTS 2023

Report by the University Council For Languages Vice Chair in Languages & Intercultural Education

UCFL congratulates all young linguists receiving their results this summer and wishes them well on the next step of their educational journey.

This brief report summarises the trends for Languages and other subjects in the 2023 Level 3 examination results. It draws from the FFT Education Datalab blog (<https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2023/08/a-level-and-other-level-3-results-2023-the-main-trends-in-grades-and-entries/>) and other sources, and looks at grade distribution and subject entries in England, and subsequently Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland.

In England, the grade distributions have more or less returned to 2019 levels after a rise in top grades during the pandemic. In 2019, 25% of A-levels were graded A or above whereas in 2023 the percentage is 26.5%. In 2022, 35.9% of all candidates were awarded A or above. However, not all subjects and not all languages saw the same grade changes this year. In most subjects, the percentage overall getting grades of A and above were slightly higher than 2019 levels. This was true of German (14.1% got A* in 2023 compared to 26.6 in 2022 and 12.1% in 2019) and for 'other Modern Languages' (i.e. those not in the so-called big 3) but for French (10.6% of all entries got A* in 2023, 20.1 in 2022 and 9.7% in 2019) and most particularly for Spanish (10% of grades awarded were A* in 2023 compared to 20.1 in 2022 and 10.0% in 2019, this was not really the case. For Spanish, this meant a fall of 15.6 percentage points in those getting a top grade of A* in 2023 compared to 2022 (source: TES - <https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/secondary/a-level-2023-results-by-subject>). See the Datalab article for tables showing the distribution of all A-level grades in 2019, 2021 and 2023 for French, German, Spanish and 'other Modern Languages' as well as all other subjects. They make interesting reading and many young people receiving their results this week may wonder whether these changes in grading standards is entirely fair, especially as not all subjects have been treated equally.

In terms of subject entries, analysis of the 2023 A-level data in England, also reveals that despite rising numbers in most subjects, Spanish, French and German are amongst the greatest drop of all subject entry numbers in 2023 (see Datalab graphics for details). Despite a gradual decline in numbers over the last 10 years or so, French numbers between 2019 and 2021 were steady whilst Spanish numbers were increasing between 2019 and 2022 but have declined in 2023. Provisional entry numbers show that in 2023, Spanish remains the most popular language at A-level with 7464 entries (compared to 6463 for French and 2198 for German). German saw a slight rise in uptake in 2022 but numbers have declined this year by 15.9% compared to last year.

In Wales and Northern Ireland, A-Level grades have not returned to pre-pandemic grade distribution in quite the same way as in England. In Wales, where AS results still contribute to A-level scores, the grades were set to broadly return to the mid-way point between the results awarded in 2019 and 2022 (source: Qualifications Wales – <https://www.qualificationswales.org/information-support/summer-2023-results/>). This

means that numbers obtaining A or above was 7.5% higher than in 2019 (34% of the total cohort) whilst in Northern Ireland, this was 8.1%. In England the percentage was only 1.3 % higher. French is likely to have remained the most popular language in Wales at A-level (in 2022 according to Stats Wales - <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Schools-and-Teachers/Examinations-and-Assessments/Advanced-Level-and-Equivalent/alevelentriesandresultspupilsaged17only-by-subjectgroup>), there were 158 entries for French, 35 for German and 89 for Spanish).

In Scotland according to the SQA (<https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/106288.html>) grades in 2023 are 'between 2019 and 2022'. This means that 32.8 of young people overall attained A in their Highers and 33% in their Advanced Highers. Scotland has seen a drop in young people taking a higher school leaving qualification in a language. Overall, Higher entries for the nine languages that can be taken at this level have declined since 2019 (Source: TES [https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/secondary/sqa-results-languages-entries-drop-higher#:~:text=Decline%20in%20Higher%20entries%20for%20European%20languages&text=Only%20two%20of%20the%20nine,year%20\(785%20in%202019\)](https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/secondary/sqa-results-languages-entries-drop-higher#:~:text=Decline%20in%20Higher%20entries%20for%20European%20languages&text=Only%20two%20of%20the%20nine,year%20(785%20in%202019))) with a particularly steep drop in French so that uptake for French is now lower than for Spanish. In 2023, 7175 young people took Highers in a language compared to 8,965 in 2019.

In England, the timely launch of the National Consortium for Language Education (NCLE - <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-and-centres/centres/international-centre-intercultural-studies/national-consortium-languages-education-ncle>) is a positive step towards reversing these trends and encouraging more young people to study one or more languages beyond KS3. UCFL through its Routes into Languages initiative continues its work with colleagues across the UK to promote languages at all levels.

In this first year of a phased return to pre-Covid grades, Admissions staff in University Language departments across the UK will have had a difficult time this year trying to work with differences in grade distributions between languages and also between the home nations. Different recruitment patterns (from the Covid years) will emerge as more applicants have gone into clearing having missed out on their original offer (source: Guardian <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/aug/18/record-number-of-uk-school-leavers-gain-university-places-through-clearing>).

Vicky Wright, August 2023