

The picture for Languages in the UK – school examination results, summer 2023

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

There seem to be a number of mixed patterns in the numbers taking Languages at school across the UK (with different sources reporting slightly different figures) as evidenced by this summer's examination results. There are some pleasing increases since last year in 'other modern languages', including Welsh as a second language, across the whole of the UK (see JCQ figures in the appendix). Data for this year is being compared across the board with pre-Covid figures from 2019 and with those from 2022 but it is likely to take a few more years before the impact of Covid on the teaching and take up of Languages disappears completely. This report looks first at this year's exam results across the UK and then at this year's UCAS applications figures.

The picture at GCSE and National 5

The British Academy report¹ that GCSE entries for French in the UK experienced a slight increase of 1.2% from last year although the overall proportion of students taking French as a subject has decreased from 2.27% to 2.22%. German entries continue to decline compared to 2022 (-4.5%). There has been strong growth in Spanish (+11.4%) at this level and entries for the category of 'other modern languages' are continuing to increase (+9%) with an overall growth compared to 2019 of 24%.

More details of individual languages under the 'other modern languages' category at both GCSE and A-level are given by JCQ for 2019, 2022 and 2023 and are included in the appendix. Numbers for GCSE Arabic (+23%), Chinese (+122%), Japanese (+23%), Modern Greek (+15%), Modern Hebrew (+55%), Panjabi (+13%), Persian (+58%), Polish (+22%), Portuguese (+15%), Russian (+53%), Turkish (+35%) and Urdu (+3%) have all increased since 2019.

In Scotland, TES Scotland uses² *Scottish Qualifications Authority* (SQA) data to show that at 'National 5', French entries have dropped by more than 1,000 from 7,870 in 2019 to 6,820 in 2023 (-13%), although this number is 3% higher than in 2022 (6,630). Spanish National 5 entries have fluctuated since 2019 (5,120) but this year marks a new high (+15%) in that period (5,900).

The picture at A-level and Highers

The British Council³ report that German had the largest decrease (-15.9%) of A-level entries compared to other subjects in England since 2022. French and Spanish saw the third and fourth largest decrease, at nearly 11%. This decrease for French and Spanish (and of course German) at A-level is rather different from the more positive pattern seen at GCSE and highlights the urgent need to investigate the likely causes (e.g. differences in language provision at local level) and possible solutions (see for example, the positive impact of the *OWRI Student Ambassador programme*⁴). JCQ

¹ <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/news/the-british-academy-responds-to-2023-gcse-data/>

² <https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/secondary/sqa-results-languages-entries-drop-higher>

³ <https://www.britishcouncil.org/about/press/british-council-statement-modern-foreign-languages-level-results-0>

⁴ https://www.meits.org/files/general-interest/uploads/OWRI_evaluation_report_march21_1.pdf

statistics⁵ for the UK⁶ show that Spanish is the most popular A-level language in schools across the UK for the fourth year running, although overall numbers have dropped since 2019, from 8,625 to 8,110 (-6%). Numbers in French have decreased by 15% (from 8,355 to 7,063) since 2019 and in German by 22% (from 3,033 to 2,358). According to JCQ figures, the overall number of A-level entries for 'other modern languages' has increased since last year (+8%). Data shows (see appendix) that at A-level, only Russian has had an overall gain in numbers since 2019 (+10%) but compared to 2022, there has been an increase in take up in Arabic (+11%), Chinese (+7%), Japanese (+5%), Modern Greek (47%), Modern Hebrew (61%), Panjabi (+5%), Persian (23%), Polish (+11%) and Turkish (+13%). Although relative numbers are small, this is positive news indicating that numbers taking the less widely taught languages may be slowly returning to pre-pandemic levels although increases are not as large as at GCSE level.

In Scotland, according to the *TES*, *SQA* data shows 'just over 7,000 Higher entries across 9 languages and a big drop in French – but there may be signs of a post-Covid comeback'. Out of these 9 languages (see graphic in appendix), only 2 have increased in numbers since 2019 and these are Mandarin (+34%) and English for Speakers of other Languages. At Advanced Higher, 2023 entries are lower for both French (-26%) and Spanish (-15%) compared to 2019.

Distribution of Grades

An unequal return to pre-pandemic level grade distribution in post-16 and post-18 examinations across the home nations and indeed across subjects and across languages⁷ will have seemed very unfair to our young linguists taking examinations this summer. In England, GCSE and A-Level grades 'largely'⁸ returned to normal (i.e. 2019 levels) and although top grades were 'slightly above the figure' for 2019 (*ibid.*) for most subjects, it was 'only just higher' for Spanish⁹ (and economics, law, geography, sociology and mathematics). In Scotland, the SQA adopted 'a sensitive approach to marking'¹⁰ and pass rates remained higher than in 2019 although lower than 2022. In Wales, grading 'continues towards pre-pandemic standards'¹¹ and in Northern Ireland, 'results reflect the continuing journey to pre-pandemic grading'¹².

The resulting unequal distribution of top A-level grades between home nations and also between languages will have caused some questioning as to the best approach amongst Admissions Officers in universities this year. In French (see JCQ data in appendix), for example, **37.6%** of the A-level cohort from England (6463) received A or A* this year compared to **48.8%** of the cohort from Wales (248) and **55.6%** for test-takers from Northern Ireland (295). In German, **44.4%** of test-takers from England (2198) received top grades, **48.8%** of test-takers from Wales (65) and **59.7%** of test-takers from Northern Ireland (62). In Spanish, only **35%** of the cohort in England (7464) received top grades, whilst **45.0%** from Wales (171) and **50.2%** from Northern Ireland (420) received top grades. Variations between national policies, cohort size (numbers given in brackets above) and attainment levels cannot account solely for the wide differences in top grades awarded across Languages and across other subjects. Although in the UK just over a quarter of all of A-level entries (27.2 %)

⁵ GCSE entries - <https://www.jcq.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/GCSE-Other-MFL-Entries-Summer-2023.pdf> and A-level entries - <https://www.jcq.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/GCE-Other-MFL-Entries-Summer-2023.pdf>

⁶ A comparative breakdown of numbers by country for each of French, German and Spanish is given in the appendix – Source JCQ

⁷<https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2023/08/a-level-and-other-level-3-results-2023-the-main-trends-in-grades-and-entries/>

⁸ <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2023/08/24/gcse-results-day-2023-your-questions-answered/>

⁹ <https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2023/08/a-level-and-other-level-3-results-2023-the-main-trends-in-grades-and-entries/>

¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/aug/08/scottish-exams-pass-rate-falls-for-second-successive-year>

¹¹ <https://www.jcq.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/GCSE-Level-2-Wales-Press-notice.pdf.pdf>

¹² <https://www.jcq.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/GCSE-Level-2-NI-Press-notice.pdf>

achieved a grade A and above this year¹³, severe grading of Languages at all levels must be kept under review (see Languages Today article, Winter 2023¹⁴ for an overview of the issue). In 2017, OFQUAL¹⁵ announced that 'it would take actions to ensure standards are set appropriately' in A-level French, German and Spanish 'given that native language speakers take these subjects' but the matter is still far from resolved especially in the 'other modern languages' category where there may well be a higher proportion of native speakers.

At GCSE, a review of 2022 GCSE data, by *Datalab*¹⁶ found that compared to other subjects, 'pupils who enter French, German, Spanish and computer science tend to achieve half a grade lower than in English and maths concluding that 'despite efforts to bring French and German in line with Spanish, they still seem more severely graded' and that 'Spanish is still more severely graded than other subjects anyway'. Following the 2019 review of inter-subject comparability at GCSE in England¹⁷, the 2023 results for French and German with Spanish have been adjusted to 'better align grade standards with Spanish'. A look at the 2023 GCSE data for England¹⁸, shows that **26%** (compared to 23.7 in 2019) of French test-takers received Grade 7 or above (equivalent to grade A), **27.6%** of German test-takers received Grade 7 or above (compared to 24.2 in 2019) whilst **26.1%** received similar grades in Spanish (compared to 27.1% in 2019). Top grades in each of the three major languages taught in English schools are now broadly in line with each other (although top grades in Spanish this year are now one full percent below those in 2019!) but as with A-levels, more work needs to be done on grade comparability with other subjects.

Fewer students are taking languages across the board but there have been recent increases in a number of languages, and this may well be due to the many initiatives (e.g. *Routes into Languages* in England¹⁹ and Wales²⁰, the *Mother Tongue Other Tongue*²¹ programme, the *Translation Exchange*²² and Scotland's *Language Explorers* programme²³) to promote Languages across the UK. The *Mandarin Excellence*²⁴ initiative may well be behind the doubling of Chinese GCSE numbers since 2019 (from 3201 to 7091) but this increase is not yet to be seen at A-level. We need more evidence that a strong intervention can impact on the popularity (and quality) of language learning overall, and on the learning of individual languages' and we hope / expect that the new Language Hubs programme in England (managed by the *National Consortium for Languages Education*²⁵ based at UCL) will have a similar impact on language take-up, especially on German with the *GIMAGINE* project²⁶. The names of the first 19 schools to work together on the first 15 hubs have just been announced²⁷ and many universities will be well placed to work with hub schools in their region. These initiatives and the new GCSEs to be first taught in England in 2024²⁸ will all have a role to play in increasing the languages pipeline into universities.

¹³ <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2023/08/18/results-day-2023-everything-you-need-to-know-about-a-level-as-level-and-t-level-results-day/>

¹⁴ <https://all-london.org.uk/languages-today-article-on-severe-grading-winter-2023/>

¹⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/setting-grade-standards-in-a-level-modern-foreign-languages>

¹⁶ <https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2023/06/revisiting-subject-difficulty-at-key-stage-4/>

¹⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/inter-subject-comparability-in-gcse-modern-foreign-languages>

¹⁸ <https://www.jcq.org.uk/examination-results/?post-year=2023&post-location=>

¹⁹ <https://www.routesintolanguages.ac.uk/>

²⁰ <https://routesintolanguagescymru.co.uk/>

²¹ <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/mothertongueothertongue/>

²² <https://www.queens.ox.ac.uk/research-at-queens/translation-exchange/>

²³ <https://scilt.org.uk/S1-S3/Supportingtransition/SLEP/tabid/8594/Default.aspx>

²⁴ <https://ci.ioe.ac.uk/mandarin-excellence-programme/>

²⁵ <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-and-centres/centres/international-centre-intercultural-studies/national-consortium-languages-education-ncle>

²⁶ <https://www.goethe.de/ins/gb/en/spr/drm.html>

²⁷ <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/language-hubs-19-schools-named-in-first-round-of-15m-reboot/>

²⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/reforms-to-encourage-more-students-to-take-up-language-gcses#:~:text=The%20revised%20GCSEs%20will%20start,families'%20in%20higher%20tier%20GCSE.>

Applications to University in 2023

We won't have any fine grained details of this year's acceptances onto Language degrees until UCAS releases its end of cycle data later in the year. However, the 2023 Cycle applicant figures released on 13th July²⁹ give some indication of any trends as they are compared with 2019-2022 figures. The *HECOS 19* data which covers *Languages and Area Studies* are given in the appendix in this document for applicants from England by gender and by age group. It should be remembered that *HECOS 19*³⁰ covers many areas beyond our subject area including creative writing, American studies and English literary studies so these application figure are only an indication of this year's intake in Languages.

Looking at these figures, they do reveal an overall decline in applications to study *Languages and Area Studies* between 2019 and 2023 of 12% (a decline from 54,410 to 47,620) for females and of 15% (a drop of 18,000 to 15,290) for males. However, a look at the application data reveals the fairly complex pattern between year of application, age and gender. Numbers of 18 year old female applicants in 2022 for example was higher than for both 2021 and 2022 with a decline in 2023. This is true for almost all age groups but in some cases, numbers were at their highest in 2021. Numbers for 18 year old males had been slowly climbing between 2020 and 2022 but have fallen back this year. Interestingly, the percentage of males applying to do Languages and Area Studies over the 5 years has remained fairly constant at 24.85% of the total cohort in 2019 and 24.3% of the total cohort in 2023 but at only a quarter of all applicants there is much to do to encourage more males to apply to this subject area.

Concluding comments

Analysis of the trends in year's examination results and applications to University reveal a mixed picture in terms of numbers studying Languages. There are some small but positive signs of a growing interest in some areas which we need to celebrate and nurture. That being said, urgent action and a [national strategy for languages](#) are a key priority – this includes universities working with schools to promote languages and study programmes providing courses that our young people are keen to engage with. UCFL and its partner organisations continue to fully support and promote these activities and to advocate for a renewed emphasis on and expansion of languages learning.

Vicky Wright, September 2023

²⁹ <https://www.ucas.com/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-releases/ucas-undergraduate-applicant-releases-2023-cycle/2023-cycle-applicant-figures-30-june-deadline>

³⁰ <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/support/documentation/hecos/cah#message>

Appendix



GCSE Other Modern Foreign Languages Entries Summer 2019, 2022 and 2023

Subject	2019	2022	2023
Arabic	4203	4931	5171
Bengali	570	455	472
Chinese	3201	5504	7091
Dutch	0	0	0
Gujarati	508	270	312
Italian	5331	4897	4284
Japanese	698	928	860
Modern Greek	589	640	675
Modern Hebrew	378	522	587
Panjabi	865	820	976
Persian	388	507	612
Polish	5704	6003	6938
Portuguese	2280	2710	2615
Russian	2133	2376	3255
Turkish	1656	2360	2243
Urdu	3679	3522	3805
All Other MFL	32183	36445	39896

Notes

1. Figures for 2020 and 2021 are not provided, as different assessment arrangements were in place.

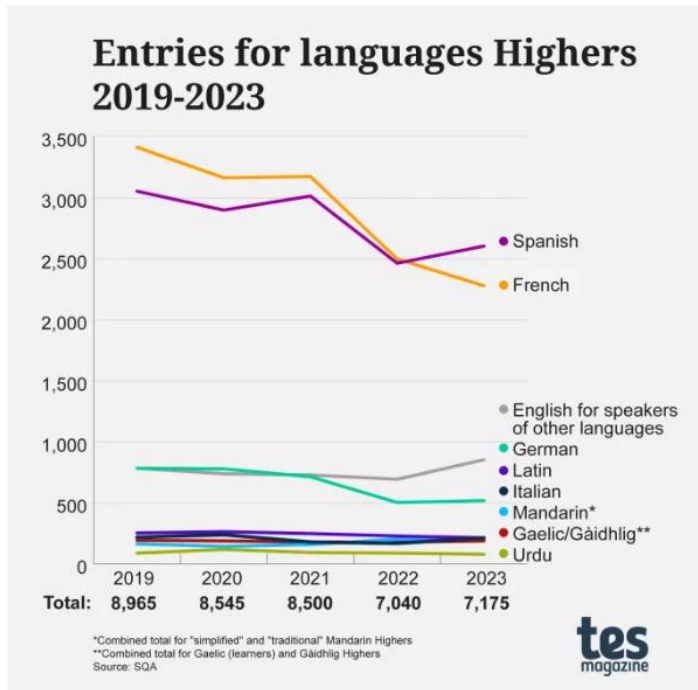


GCE A Level Other Modern Language UK Entries June 2019, 2022 and 2023

Subject	2019	2022	2023
Arabic	835	570	631
Bengali	28	12	10
Chinese	2272	1349	1449
Dutch	35	0	0
Gujarati	25	0~	0~
Italian	822	800	804
Japanese	216	155	162
Modern Greek	172	79	116
Modern Hebrew	56	28	45
Panjabi	202	112	118
Persian	172	128	158
Polish	1169	657	731
Portuguese	530	294	275
Russian	754	738	827
Turkish	591	366	414
Urdu	410	223	211
All Other MFL	8289	5518	5955

Notes:

1. Very low entry figures, fewer than 10 (-) not published but included in the total figure.
2. Figures for 2020 and 2021 are not provided, as different assessment arrangements were in place.



A-Levels England - overall numbers in 2019, 2022 and 2023 and cumulative percentages achieving A* and A (left to right). Source: JCQ.

French

2023	6463	10.6%	37.6%
2022	7347	20.1%	50.1%
2019	7607	9.7%	36.4%

German

2023	2198	14.1%	44.4%
2022	2646	26.6%	58.0%
2019	2864	12.1%	40.4%

Spanish

2023	7464	10.0%	35.0%
2022	8496	22.5%	50.6%
2019	7932	10.0%	34.9%

Other modern languages

2023	5566	23.5%	60.7%
2022	5171	39.1%	71.6%
2019	7762	17.7%	51.5%

A-Levels Wales - overall numbers in 2019, 2022 and 2023 and cumulative percentages achieving A* and A (left to right). Source: JCQ

French

2023	248	20.6%	48.8%
2022	245	29.4%	60.4%
2019	314	13.7%	39.2%

German

2023	65	30.8%	60.0%
2022	58	31.0%	56.9%
2019	77	24.7%	51.9%

Spanish

2023	171	22.2%	45.0%
2022	157	30.6%	57.3%
2019	178	20.2%	34.8%

Welsh as a second language

2023	165	4.2%	21.8%
2022	224	6.7%	31.3%
2019	248	4.0%	13.7%

Other modern languages

2023	167	15.6%	58.1%
2022	173	32.4%	59.5%
2019	244	9.4%	43.0%

A-Levels Northern Ireland - overall numbers in 2019, 2022 and 2023 and cumulative percentages achieving A* and A (left to right). Source: JCQ.

French

2023	295	18.6	55.6
2022	282	21.3	65.2
2019	358	13.7	43.3

German

2023	62	29.0	59.7
2022	72	31.9	65.3
2019	69	21.7	50.7

Spanish

2023	420	11.7	50.2
2022	388	14.4	55.7
2019	458	8.3	43.0

Other modern languages

2023	57	14.0	36.8
2022	71	25.4	53.5
2019	123	14.6	41.5

GCSEs England - overall numbers in 2019, 2022 and 2023 and cumulative percentages achieving 9-7 / from (left to right). Source: JCQ.

French

2023	125151	8.0	15.5	26.0
2022	122746	10.3	19.6	31.4
2019	122803	5.1	12.8	23.7

German

2023	33677	9.3	17.7	27.6
2022	34966	12.4	22.5	35.1
2019	41222	5.8	13.1	24.2

Spanish

2023	120198	6.4	14.7	26.1
2022	107488	9.3	18.7	31.5
2019	96811	6.9	15.5	27.1

Other modern languages

2023	38429	38.0	57.6	70.1
2022	35202	39.3	59.3	71.6
2019	26417	32.2	53.4	66.7

GCSEs Wales - overall numbers in 2019, 2022 and 2023 and cumulative percentages achieving A* and A (left to right). Source: JCQ.

French

2023	1908	21.2	41.2
2022	2570	26.7	46.7
2019	3005	16.2	34.2

German

2023	332	25.3	44.9
2022	455	27.0	50.3
2019	561	16.8	36.9

Spanish

2023	1342	22.4	38.3
2022	1247	25.5	43.1
2019	1412	18.3	32.4

Welsh as a second Language

2023	21021	7.2	22.4
2022	21382	8.6	22.9
2019	19509	6.8	21.8

Other modern languages

2023	0	0.0	0.0
2022	0	0.0	0.0
2019	83	20.5	42.2

GCSEs Northern Ireland - overall numbers in 2019, 2022 and 2023 and cumulative percentages achieving A* and A (left to right). Source: JCQ

French

2023	3010	13.7	39.3
2022	3151	17.8	42.9
2019	3924	9.1	35.2

German

2023	557	15.4	44.7
2022	706	19.1	47.9
2019	677	12.4	41.4

Spanish

2023	3479	16.0	42.5
2022	3573	19.4	44.4
2019	3254	11.6	40.7

UCAS 2023 Cycle applicant figures for England (June 30th deadline) only, by age and gender

2019	(CAH19) language and area studies	17 and under	England	Female	140
2020	(CAH19) language and area studies	17 and under	England	Female	110
2021	(CAH19) language and area studies	17 and under	England	Female	120
2022	(CAH19) language and area studies	17 and under	England	Female	130
2023	(CAH19) language and area studies	17 and under	England	Female	100

2019	(CAH19) language and area studies	18	England	Female	41030
2020	(CAH19) language and area studies	18	England	Female	38450
2021	(CAH19) language and area studies	18	England	Female	38270
2022	(CAH19) language and area studies	18	England	Female	38670
2023	(CAH19) language and area studies	18	England	Female	37050

2019	(CAH19) language and area studies	19	England	Female	7840
2020	(CAH19) language and area studies	19	England	Female	6920
2021	(CAH19) language and area studies	19	England	Female	6130
2022	(CAH19) language and area studies	19	England	Female	6770
2023	(CAH19) language and area studies	19	England	Female	6530

2019	(CAH19) language and area studies	20	England	Female	2100
2020	(CAH19) language and area studies	20	England	Female	1790
2021	(CAH19) language and area studies	20	England	Female	1500
2022	(CAH19) language and area studies	20	England	Female	1620
2023	(CAH19) language and area studies	20	England	Female	1680

2019	(CAH19) language and area studies	21 - 24	England	Female	2010
2020	(CAH19) language and area studies	21 - 24	England	Female	1780
2021	(CAH19) language and area studies	21 - 24	England	Female	1770
2022	(CAH19) language and area studies	21 - 24	England	Female	1440
2023	(CAH19) language and area studies	21 - 24	England	Female	1480

2019	(CAH19) language and area studies	25 - 29	England	Female	640
2020	(CAH19) language and area studies	25 - 29	England	Female	650
2021	(CAH19) language and area studies	25 - 29	England	Female	590
2022	(CAH19) language and area studies	25 - 29	England	Female	480
2023	(CAH19) language and area studies	25 - 29	England	Female	360

2019	(CAH19) language and area studies	30 - 34	England	Female	230
2020	(CAH19) language and area studies	30 - 34	England	Female	270
2021	(CAH19) language and area studies	30 - 34	England	Female	190
2022	(CAH19) language and area studies	30 - 34	England	Female	160
2023	(CAH19) language and area studies	30 - 34	England	Female	140

2019	(CAH19) language and area studies	35 and over	England	Female	420
2020	(CAH19) language and area studies	35 and over	England	Female	420
2021	(CAH19) language and area studies	35 and over	England	Female	290
2022	(CAH19) language and area studies	35 and over	England	Female	310
2023	(CAH19) language and area studies	35 and over	England	Female	280

Total female applicants from England applying to CAH19 in 2019 = 54,410

Total female applicants from England applying to CAH19 in 2023 = 47,620

2019	(CAH19) language and area studies	17 and under	England	Male	40
2020	(CAH19) language and area studies	17 and under	England	Male	50
2021	(CAH19) language and area studies	17 and under	England	Male	10
2022	(CAH19) language and area studies	17 and under	England	Male	30
2023	(CAH19) language and area studies	17 and under	England	Male	40

2019	(CAH19) language and area studies	18	England	Male	12100
2020	(CAH19) language and area studies	18	England	Male	11180
2021	(CAH19) language and area studies	18	England	Male	11220
2022	(CAH19) language and area studies	18	England	Male	11700
2023	(CAH19) language and area studies	18	England	Male	10610

2019	(CAH19) language and area studies	19	England	Male	2940
2020	(CAH19) language and area studies	19	England	Male	2440
2021	(CAH19) language and area studies	19	England	Male	2300
2022	(CAH19) language and area studies	19	England	Male	2300
2023	(CAH19) language and area studies	19	England	Male	2430

2019	(CAH19) language and area studies	20	England	Male	970
2020	(CAH19) language and area studies	20	England	Male	750
2021	(CAH19) language and area studies	20	England	Male	790
2022	(CAH19) language and area studies	20	England	Male	690
2023	(CAH19) language and area studies	20	England	Male	710

2019	(CAH19) language and area studies	21 - 24	England	Male	1170
2020	(CAH19) language and area studies	21 - 24	England	Male	1100
2021	(CAH19) language and area studies	21 - 24	England	Male	1070
2022	(CAH19) language and area studies	21 - 24	England	Male	910
2023	(CAH19) language and area studies	21 - 24	England	Male	870

2019	(CAH19) language and area studies	25 - 29	England	Male	440
2020	(CAH19) language and area studies	25 - 29	England	Male	460

2021	(CAH19) language and area studies	25 - 29	England	Male	380
2022	(CAH19) language and area studies	25 - 29	England	Male	460
2023	(CAH19) language and area studies	25 - 29	England	Male	340

2019	(CAH19) language and area studies	30 - 34	England	Male	150
2020	(CAH19) language and area studies	30 - 34	England	Male	160
2021	(CAH19) language and area studies	30 - 34	England	Male	190
2022	(CAH19) language and area studies	30 - 34	England	Male	130
2023	(CAH19) language and area studies	30 - 34	England	Male	110

2019	(CAH19) language and area studies	35 and over	England	Male	190
2020	(CAH19) language and area studies	35 and over	England	Male	250
2021	(CAH19) language and area studies	35 and over	England	Male	210
2022	(CAH19) language and area studies	35 and over	England	Male	170
2023	(CAH19) language and area studies	35 and over	England	Male	180

Total male applicants from England applying to CAH19 in 2019 = 18,000

Total male applicants from England applying to CAH19 in 2023 = 15,290
