

RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

Recent trends in modern foreign language exam entries in anglophone countries

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ofqual

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Overview

In England, there is discussion surrounding the uptake of modern foreign languages (MFL), specifically French, German and Spanish, at GCSE level and the possible reasons behind this. Changing trends in entries to exams may reflect a national or cultural appetite of learners to undertake certain subjects. While in England, the focus of speculation for changes in MFL uptake has been on perceived difficulty and accountability measures, it is likely to be the product of a large range of factors. On this basis, we thought it would be useful to look more widely at uptake of MFL subjects to see whether England's uptake trends look similar to or different from other countries.

This report presents data from different anglophone countries to contrast the trends in entries to three MFL subjects – French, German and Spanish – at GCSE (or equivalent) level. This explores the questions surrounding trends in England, and if they are unique to this country or not.

Data from Australia, Canada, England, Ireland, Northern Ireland, United States of America and Wales, has been collected from various sources (see tables 1 and 2) and is presented in the proceeding sections.

Table 1. Hyperlinks to sources of exam entry data for each country included in report.

Country	Qualification	Source
England, Northern Ireland, Wales	GCSE	Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ), GCSE and A level main results tables, 2002 to 2019
Scotland	SQA level 3-5 (including Access 3, Intermediate 1-2, National 3-5, Standard)	SQA annual statistical reports 2002-2019
Ireland	Junior certificate	Irish State Examination Commission's annual examination statistics reports (2005-2018)
Australia	Year 12 subject enrolments (SSCE level)	Australian curriculum, assessment and reporting authority (ACARA)
New Zealand	Year 11 subject enrolments (NCEA level 1)	Education counts, secondary subject enrolments
USA	K-12 enrolments	2005 and 2008: American Council on the teaching of foreign languages 2015: American Councils, the national k-12 foreign language enrolment survey report
Canada	Programme language enrolments in public schools	Statistics Canada: number of students in official languages programs

Abbreviations: GCSE= General Certificate of Secondary Education; SQA= Scottish Qualifications Authority; SSCE= Senior Secondary Certificate of Education; NCEA= National Certificate of Educational Achievement; K-12= Kindergarten to 12th Grade.

Population data for estimating the proportion of total exam populations entering exams was collected for countries shown in table 2. Other countries were not included in this analysis due to the unavailability of relevant or reliable data.

Table 1. Hyperlinks to sources of population data for each relevant countries.

Country	Source
England, Wales, Northern Ireland, Scotland	Office of National Statistics (ONS): estimates of the population for the UK, England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland
Ireland	Irish State Examination Commission's annual examination statistics reports (2005-2018)

Trends in Entry Numbers

Information displayed here shows the total number of entries to French, German and Spanish GCSE qualifications in England, Northern Ireland and Wales or their GCSE equivalents in Scotland, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, United States of America and Canada. For each country 2 figures are presented, one showing the total number of entries for each subject – which shows the individual subject trends over time – and another showing cumulative entries (figures stacked on top of each other) – which shows overall trends in modern foreign language (MFL) entries. Entries to MFL subjects other than French, German and Spanish have not been included in our analysis. In England, other MFL subjects account for a minority of entries (and have been broadly consistent over time) and as such may not provide a useful comparison. Furthermore, international data on entries to these subjects is scarce.

Overall trends in MFL entries are shown in the top graph of figure 1. This shows that since 2002 entries to MFL exams have reduced by almost half. This is mainly a reflection of the reduction in entries to French GCSE exams and compounded by falling entries to German GCSEs. The change in entries to Spanish GCSEs does little to dampen this effect.

Since 2002, Spanish GCSE entries have been increasing in England, to the point where they overtook German GCSE entries in 2011. They have continued to increase and in 2019 had only 29,000 fewer entries than French GCSE. This trend is alongside the reduction in French GCSE entries which since 2002 have declined by almost two thirds from 315,000 to 123,000. From 2012 to 2013 all 3 MFL subjects saw an increase in entries, most pronounced in French. However, following this French and German entries have again declined, in comparison to Spanish which has seen gradual increases. In 2019 both French and Spanish entries saw a slight increase compared to 2018.

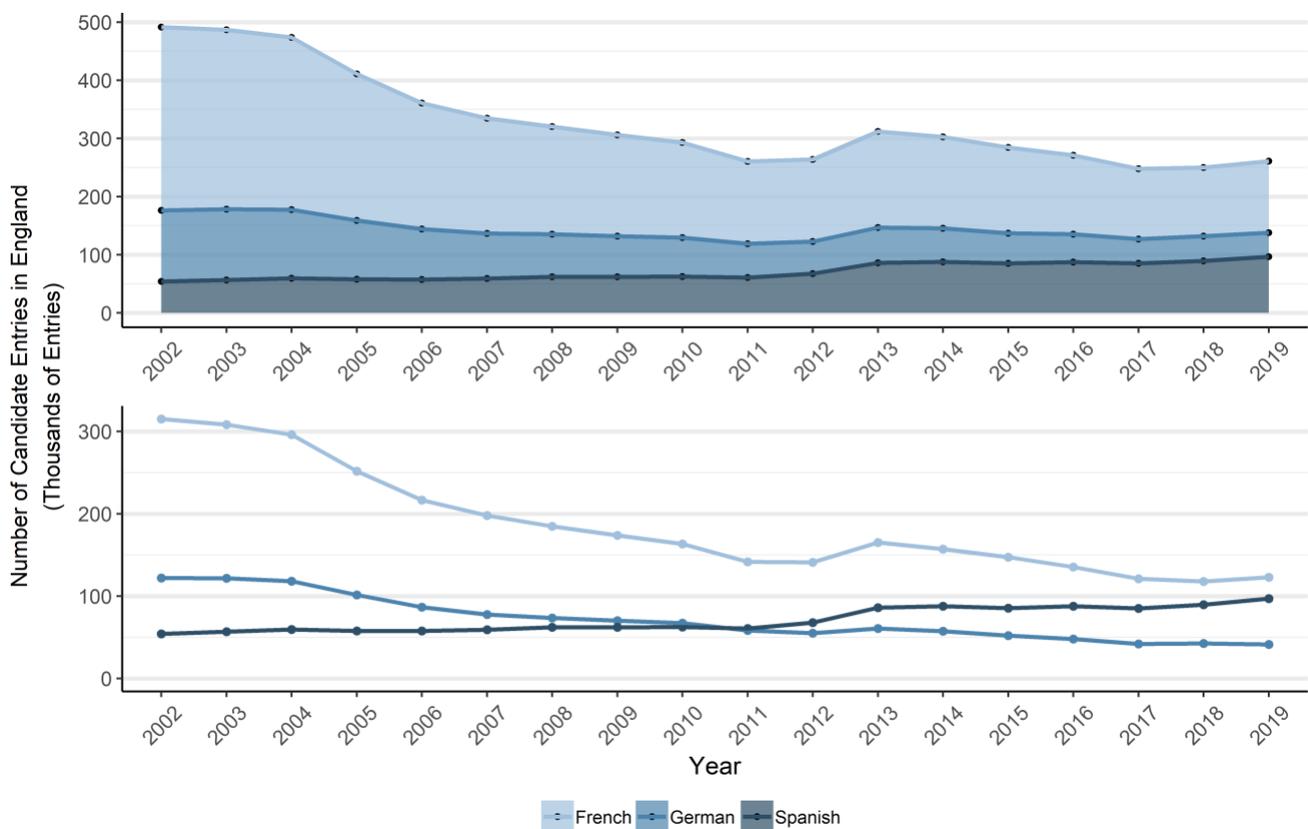


Figure 1. Number of entries for French, German and Spanish GCSE exams between 2002 and 2019 in England. The top graph shows combined entries to French, German and Spanish in each year, while the bottom graph shows entries for individual subjects. Data extracted from JCQ GCSE main results tables for summers 2002-2019.

Overall trends in Wales have shown a reduction in total entries to MFL subjects of almost two thirds between 2002 and 2019. Similar to England, this is largely a reflection of the reduction in entries to French GCSE exams.

Also, like England, a decreasing trend in entries to French and German GCSEs between 2002 and 2019 can be seen. Spanish entries have generally increased up to 2015 when, following a slight reduction, entries have remained relatively stable at around 1,500. Entries to Spanish GCSEs rose above entries to German GCSEs in 2010, a year earlier than England.

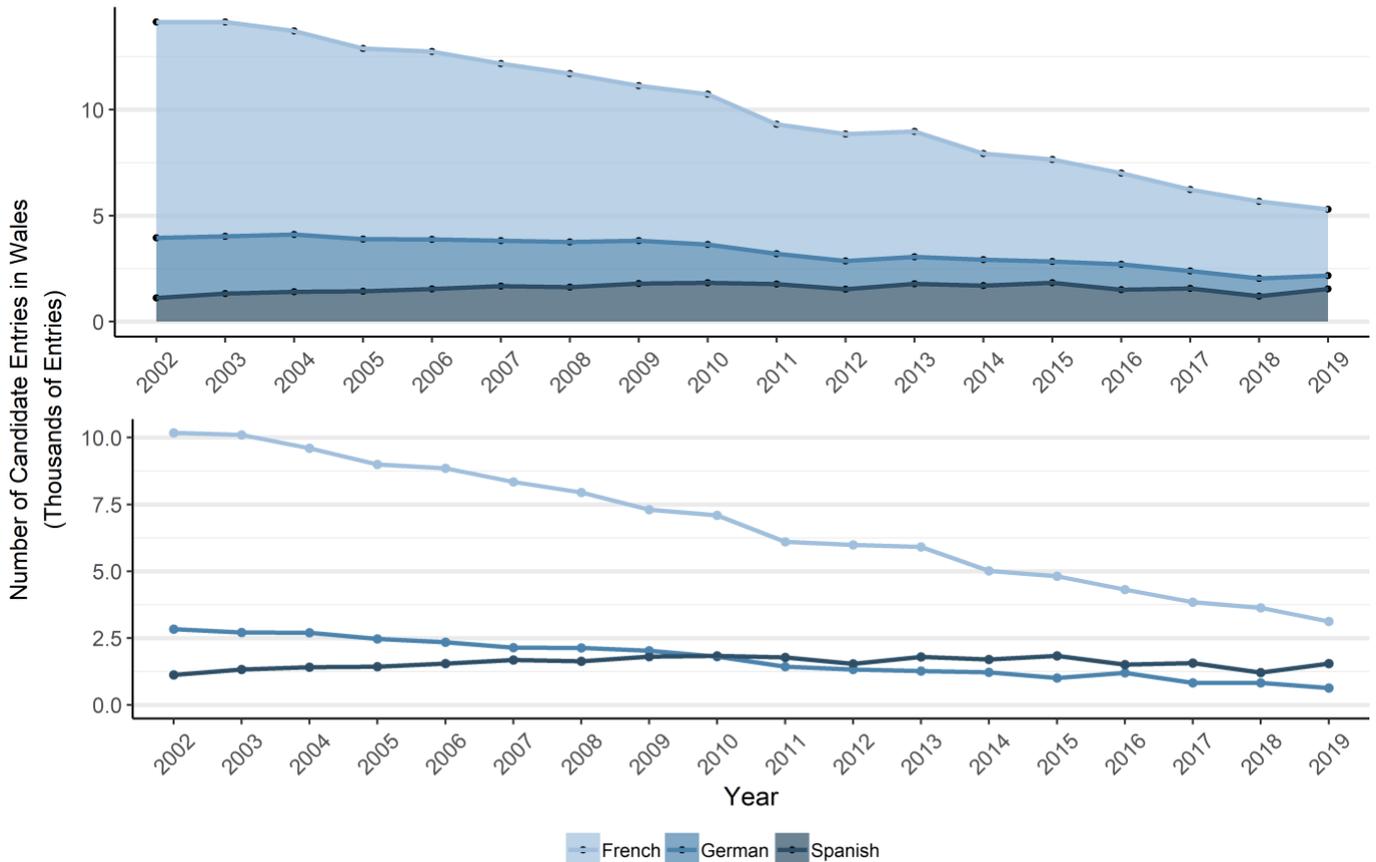


Figure 2. Number of entries for French, German and Spanish GCSE exams between 2002 and 2019 in Wales. The top graph shows combined entries to French, German and Spanish in each year, whilst the bottom graph shows entries for individual subjects. Data extracted from JCQ GCSE main results tables for summers 2002-2019.

The top graph of figure 3 shows the overall trends in entries to Northern Irish MFL GCSEs. Here we can see that total entries between 2002 and 2019 have reduced by around 50%. Like England and Wales, this was largely a reflection of decreasing entries to French GCSEs.

Entries to GCSEs in Northern Ireland follow a similar trend to that seen in England and Wales. A slight difference seen in Northern Ireland is that entries to Spanish GCSEs have been higher than German GCSE entries since 2002. Apart from this, French and German GCSE entries have generally declined since 2002 while Spanish entries have increased. Entries to the 2019 exam series showed a reduction in all 3 subjects compared to 2018.

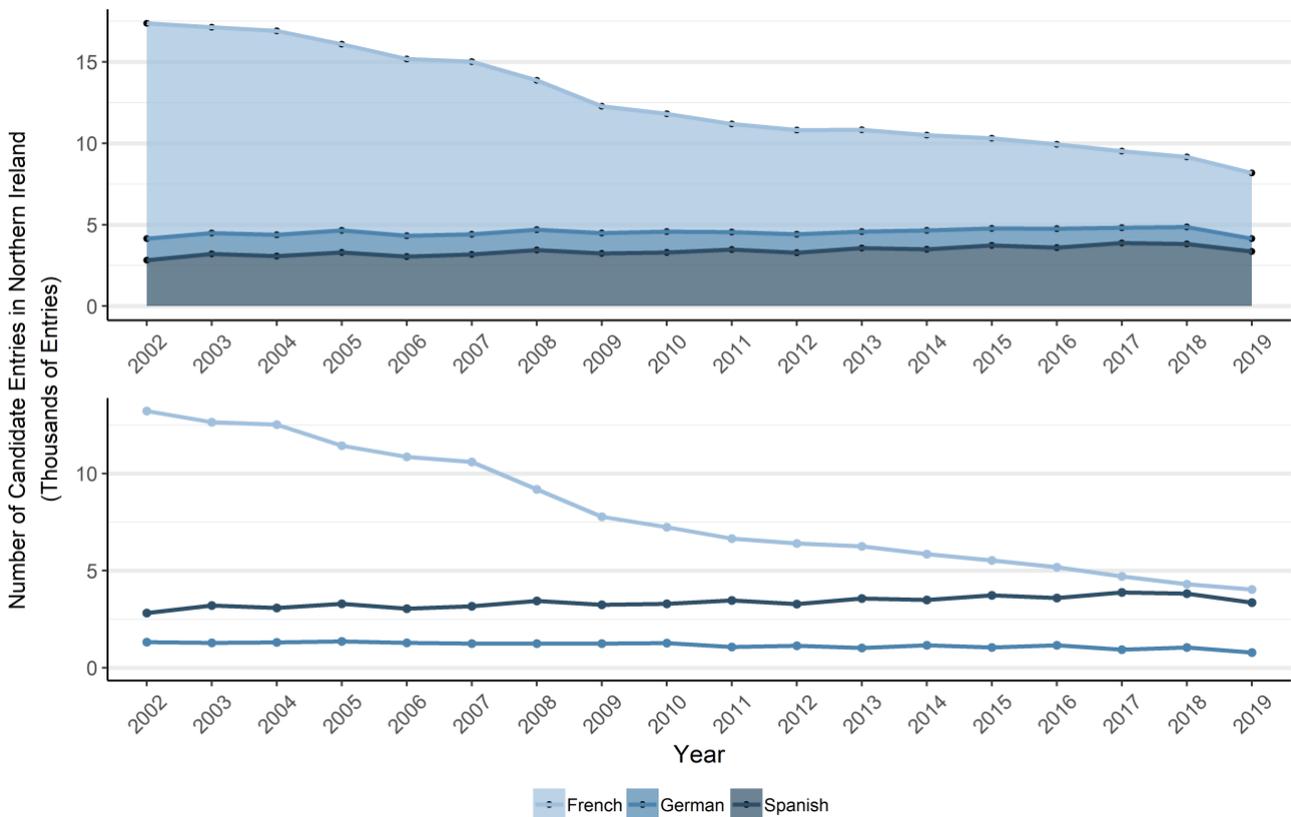


Figure 3. Number of entries for French, German and Spanish GCSE exams between 2002 and 2019 in Northern Ireland. The top graph shows combined entries to French, German and Spanish in each year, whilst the bottom graph shows entries for individual subjects. Data extracted from JCQ GCSE main results tables for summers 2002-2019.

In figure 4 we see that overall entries to all 3 MFL subjects in Scotland have declined by almost two thirds. Like other countries reported so far, this is largely a reflection of declining entries to French exams.

Individually, entry to MFL subjects at level 3, 4 and 5 on the Scottish Qualification Framework since 2002 have shown similar trends to GCSE entries in England. From 2002 to 2019 entries to French exams declined by more than two thirds from around 41,000 to around 11,000. The largest drop in French entries in Scotland is seen in 2014 when there was a reduction of more than 10,000 entries compared to 2013. Like other countries in the United Kingdom, entries to Spanish exams have gradually increased since 2002, overtaking entries to German exams in 2013, and now quite similar to entries to French exams (just 4,000 fewer).

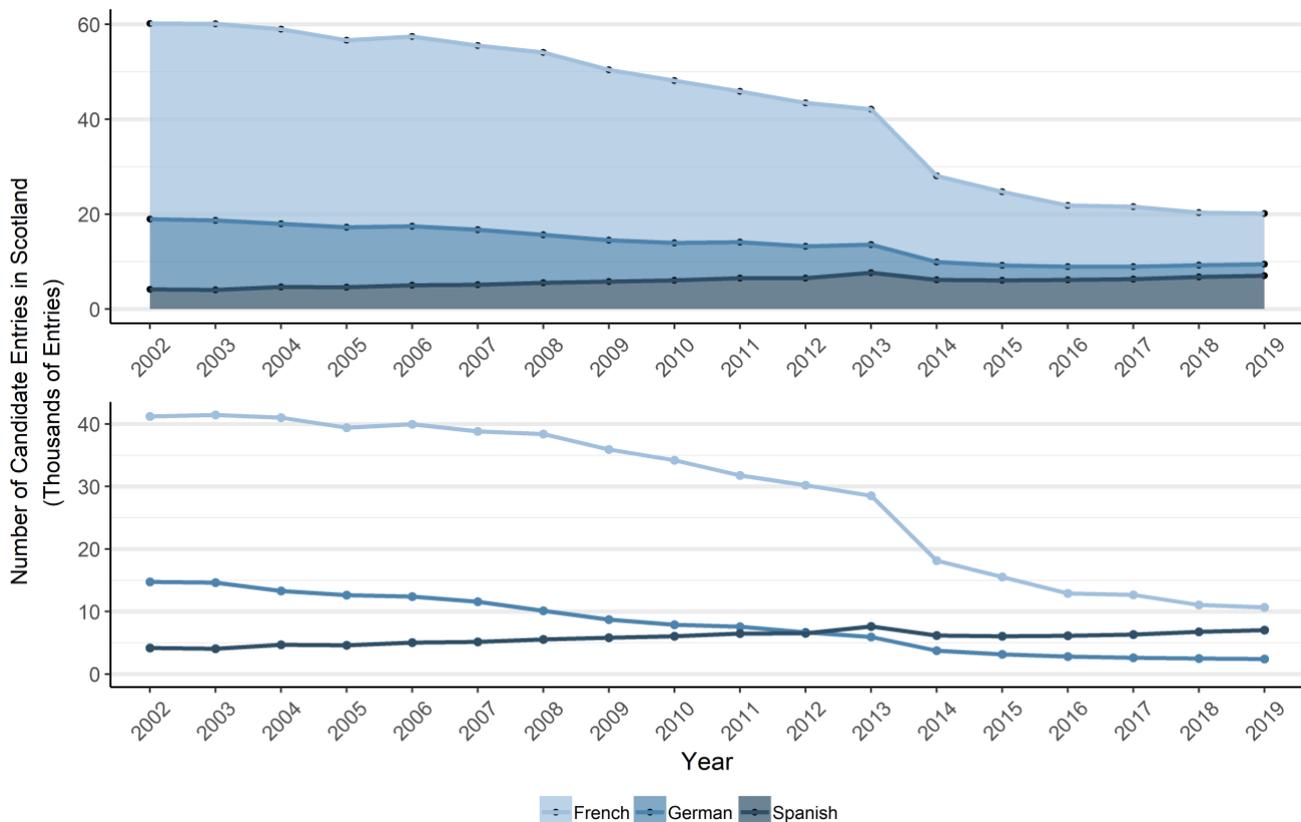


Figure 4. Number of entries for French, German and Spanish exams (SQF level 3-5; including national 3-5, intermediate 1-2, access 3 and Standard) between 2002 and 2018 in Scotland. The top graph shows combined entries to French, German and Spanish in each year, while the bottom graph shows entries for individual subjects. Data extracted from Scottish Qualification Authority annual statistical reports 2002-2018.

In Ireland overall entries, shown in the top graph of figure 5, have slightly increased between 2005 and 2018. This is mainly a reflection of the increase in entries to Spanish, which mitigates the slight reduction seen in entries to French.

Data from Ireland were only available from 2005 to 2018. The trend in entries to junior certificates for French exams shows a reduction of around 5,000 entries over this period. This is a less drastic reduction in entries, in comparison with countries in the United Kingdom. Similar to previous figures in this report, entries to Spanish exams have increased. However, different from other countries, entries to German exams have also increased and between 2005 and 2018 have remained above that of entries to Spanish exams.

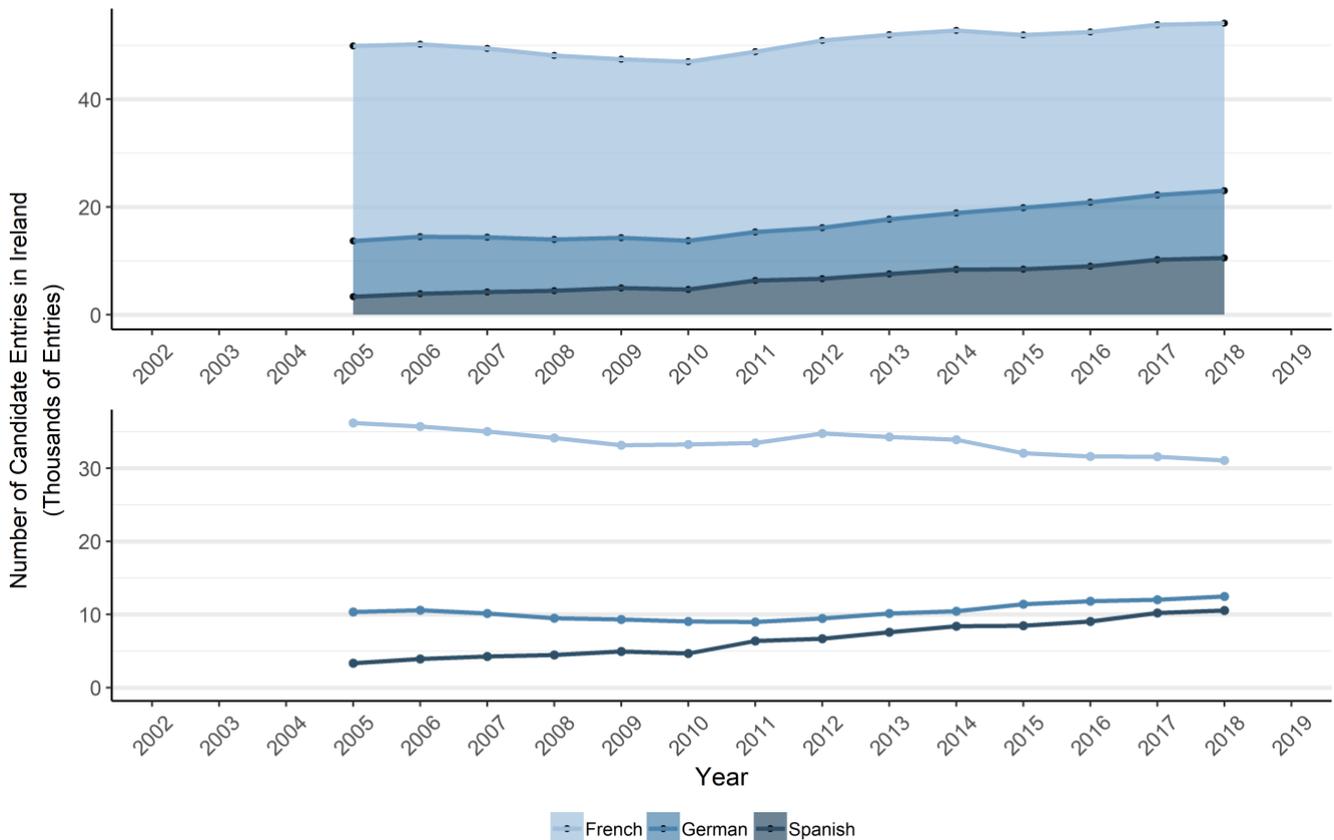


Figure 5. Number of entries for French, German and Spanish Junior Certificates between 2002 and 2018 in Ireland. The top graph shows combined entries to French, German and Spanish in each year, whilst the bottom graph shows entries for individual subjects. Data extracted from Irish State Examination Commission annual state examination statistics 2002-2018.

Data from New Zealand were available from 2003 to 2018, as shown in figure 6. Overall, the decrease in total entries to the three MFL subjects does not appear as significant in comparison to entries in UK countries. The decline in entries to French exams has largely been mitigated by increased entries to Spanish exams, however there is still a net decrease of just under 1,000 entries.

Generally, trends in entries to French, German and Spanish exams are similar to those seen in the UK. French and German entries have both shown an overall decrease since 2003, while entries to Spanish exams have increased. Entries to French exams showed a gradual increase between 2003 and 2008, before then declining over the following years. This is unlike trends seen in the UK entries, which have seen gradual decreases since 2002. Entries to German exams in New Zealand have been below that of entries to Spanish exams since 2004 and have continued to decline over the period observed. Enrolments to Spanish have generally increased since 2003. This increase in Spanish entries alongside the reduction in French entries has resulted in a difference of just over 300 more entries to French exams in 2018. In comparison there were more than 1,800 more entries to French exams in 2003.

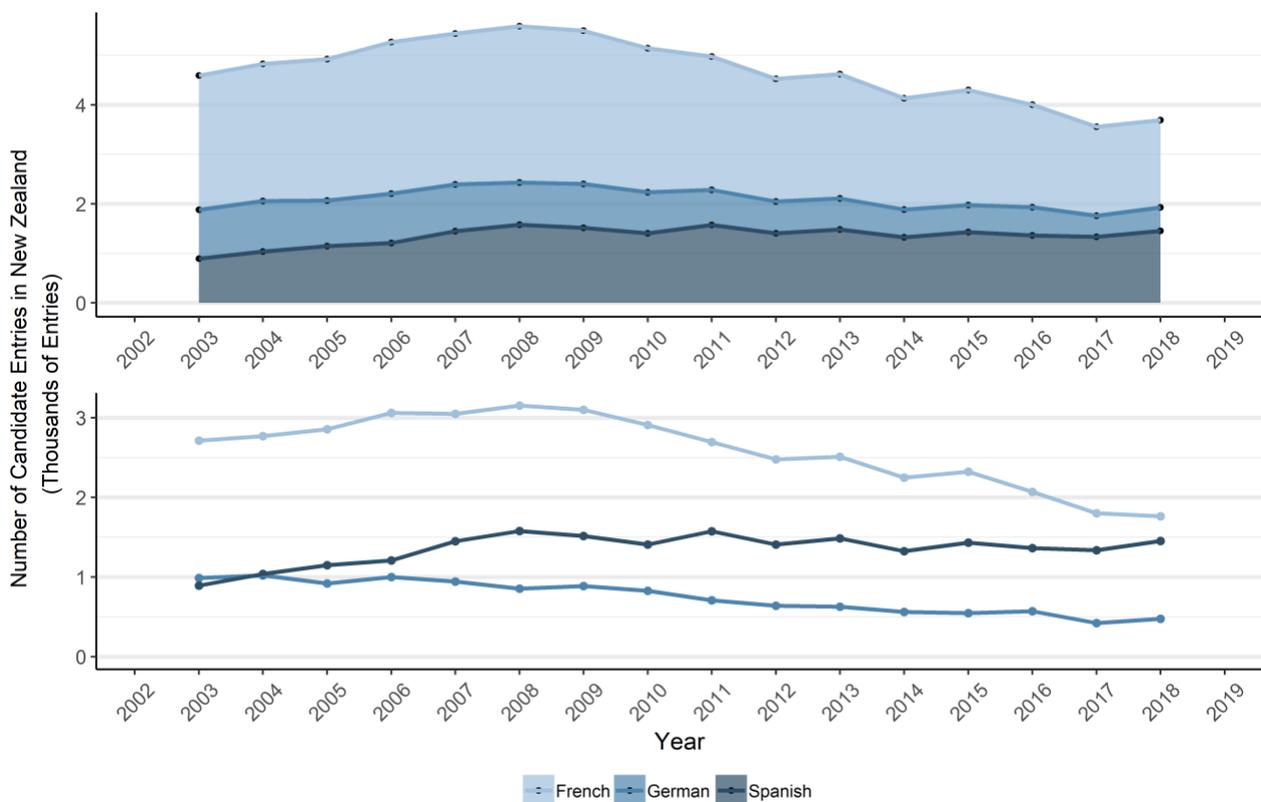


Figure 6. Number of Year 11 enrolments for French, German and Spanish between 2003 and 2018 in New Zealand. The top graph shows combined entries to French, German and Spanish in each year, whilst the bottom graph shows entries for individual subjects. Data extracted from Secondary Languages by School report, produced by Education Counts.

Entry figures for French, German and Spanish exams in Australia were estimated from data provided by ACARA. A number for the total MFL entries is provided in reports from ACARA from 2010 to 2017. They also report a breakdown for the 3 individual MFL subjects, but only present the percentage of total MFL entries and not the actual number of entries. This allows an estimation of the number of entries, but may be subject to a degree of error due to rounding.

The trend in overall MFL entry figures shows little change in the total amount of entries to the MFL subjects. As seen in figure 7, the trend in Australia is more similar to Ireland than UK countries or New Zealand as not much change seen over the period observed.

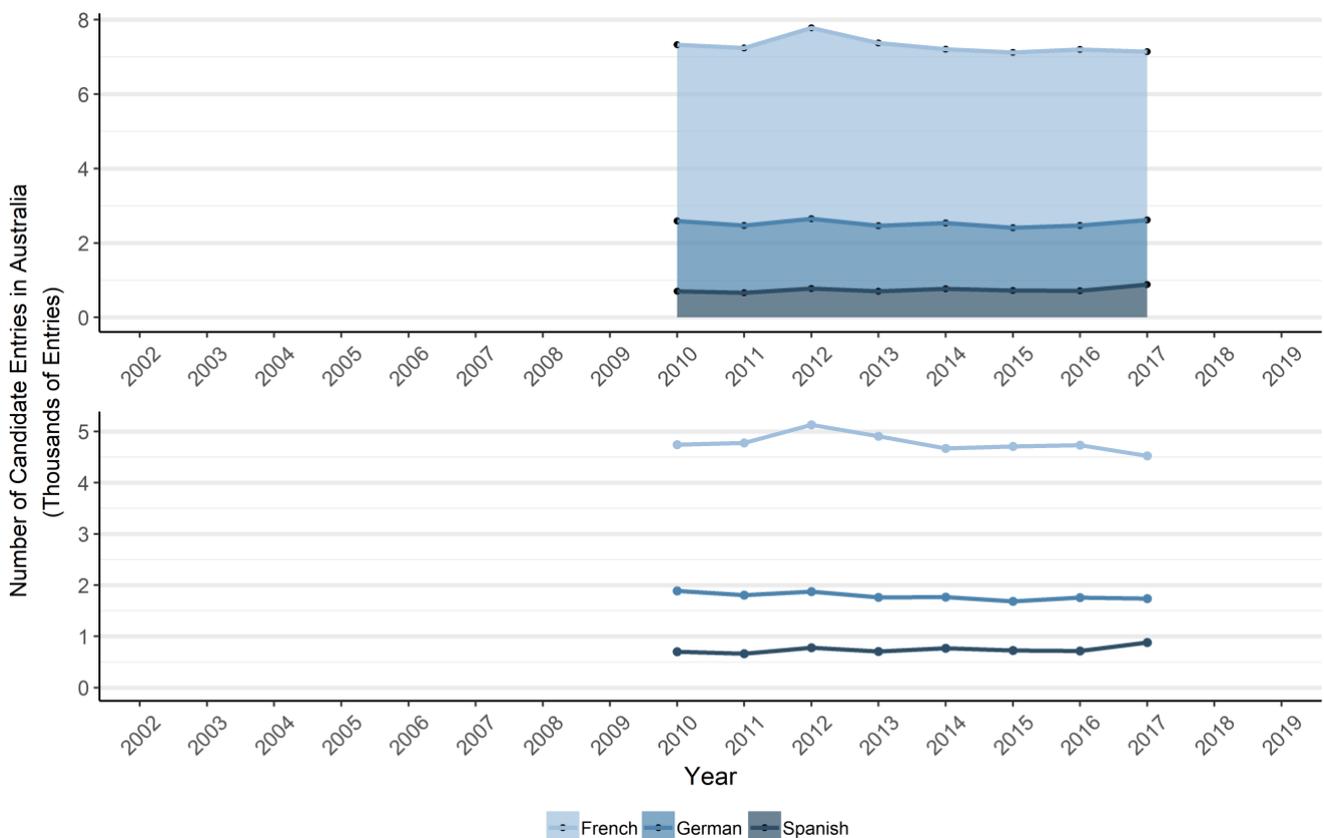


Figure 7. Number of Year 12 enrolments for French, German and Spanish between 2010 and 2017 in Australia. The top graph shows combined entries to French, German and Spanish in each year, whilst the bottom graph shows entries for individual subjects. Data extracted from Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), national report of schooling – Year 12 subject enrolments.

Reporting of subject enrolment figures at a national level in the USA may not be consistent. This is evidenced by enrolment data for 17 states being estimated based on certain features of the Kindergarten to 12th grade (K-12) population in each state. Furthermore, the figures provided do not relate specifically to leavers of secondary schooling, but instead are total figures of students enrolled in a language subject from Kindergarten to 12th grade. This suggests data from the USA may not be directly comparable to data reported by other countries, but nevertheless give some indication of trends over time.

Although there are limitations in data from the US, they do show a trend of increased enrolments to Spanish from 2005 to 2014. In comparison, German and French enrolments have stayed relatively stable. This is likely to reflect the population of the US and the status of Spanish as first and second language in some areas.

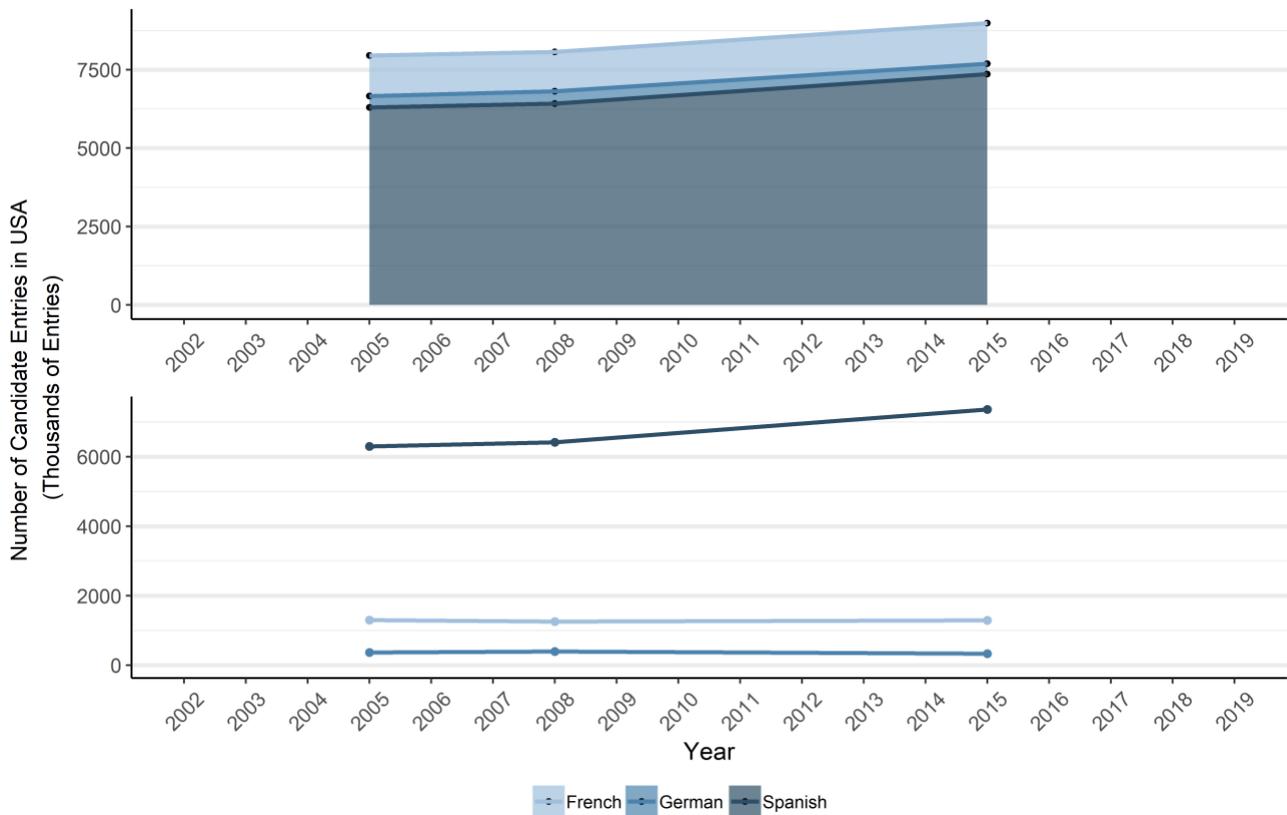


Figure 8. Number of enrolments in French, German and Spanish in the United States of America. Data represents sum of Kindergarten to 12th grade enrolments in 2005, 2008 and 2015. The top graph shows combined enrolments to French, German and Spanish in each year, while the bottom graph shows enrolments for individual subjects. Extracted from reports produced by the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages and the American Councils for International Education.

Official national statistics from Canada relating to entries to examinations or enrolments in courses, at subject level, are not routinely collected. This makes direct comparison to other anglophone countries difficult. Comparison is further complicated as Canada is officially a bilingual country (with Provinces usually favouring either English or French as their official language) and therefore report their data with a different viewpoint. Data reported by Statistics Canada, shown in figure 9, refers to the method with which students are taught French or English. The following definitions are provided by Statistics Canada to clarify their terminology:

- First official language: these programs allow children in the linguistic minority to pursue their education in their first official language (French outside Québec, English in Québec)
- French immersion: programs where French is the language of instruction for students attending English schools
- Regular second language: programs where French is taught to students attending English schools outside Quebec, or programs where English is taught to students attending French schools in Quebec, as a subject in the regular course offerings

The data presented by Statistics Canada collates information from English and French Provinces, so it is unclear how French is being taught (as a foreign language or as the primary language). Moreover, no insight is provided into German and Spanish enrolments in these reports.

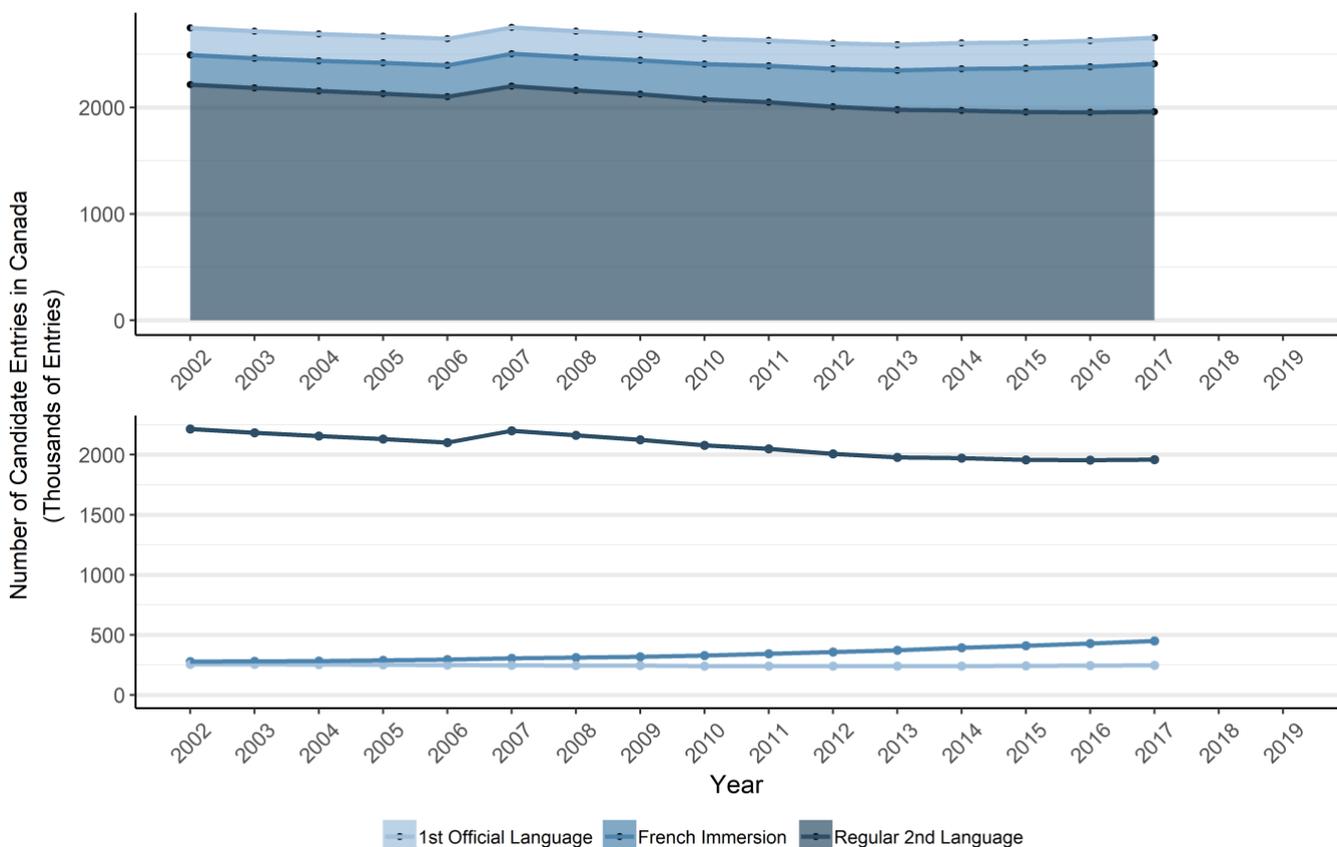


Figure 9. Official programme language enrolments in Canadian public schools from 2002 to 2017. The top graph shows combined enrolments to French, German and Spanish in each year, while the bottom graph shows enrolments for individual subjects. Data extracted from Statistics Canada.

Proportion of Entries

To provide further insight into the trends of entries to MFL GCSEs, we have calculated the proportion of the exam series population who entered into each MFL subject (MFL entries divided by total candidates). For England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales the number of unique candidates in each exam series is not routinely reported. Therefore, this number is estimated from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) report on 'mid-year (2001-2018) detailed time-series estimates the of UK population', which provides a breakdown of population count by age and country. We took the values reported for the number of 16-year-olds in each year to represent the potential maximum number of 16-year-olds in each exam series (2002-2018). It should be noted that this data is likely to be approximate as not all 16-year-olds take GCSEs, and there will be entries from other age groups. Data for Ireland was extracted from the Irish State Examination Commission's annual examination statistics reports (2005-2018), which reports the number of candidates in Ireland for each year.

In figure 10 we can see a cumulative proportion (each figure stacked at each time point). Similar trends can be seen in proportions of students entering exams as to those observed in the number (count) of students entering exams, as shown in figures 1-5. In England we can see the total proportion of students entering into French, German or Spanish in 2019 is comparable to the proportions seen in Northern Ireland and Scotland. Comparatively, Wales shows the lowest proportion of students entered for GCSE French, German or Spanish exams, with less than 20% of students doing so. This is in contrast to Ireland which shows the highest proportion of students entered for MFL exams. Furthermore, entries in Ireland show no major variation between 2005 and 2018, having always stayed around 90% in this period.

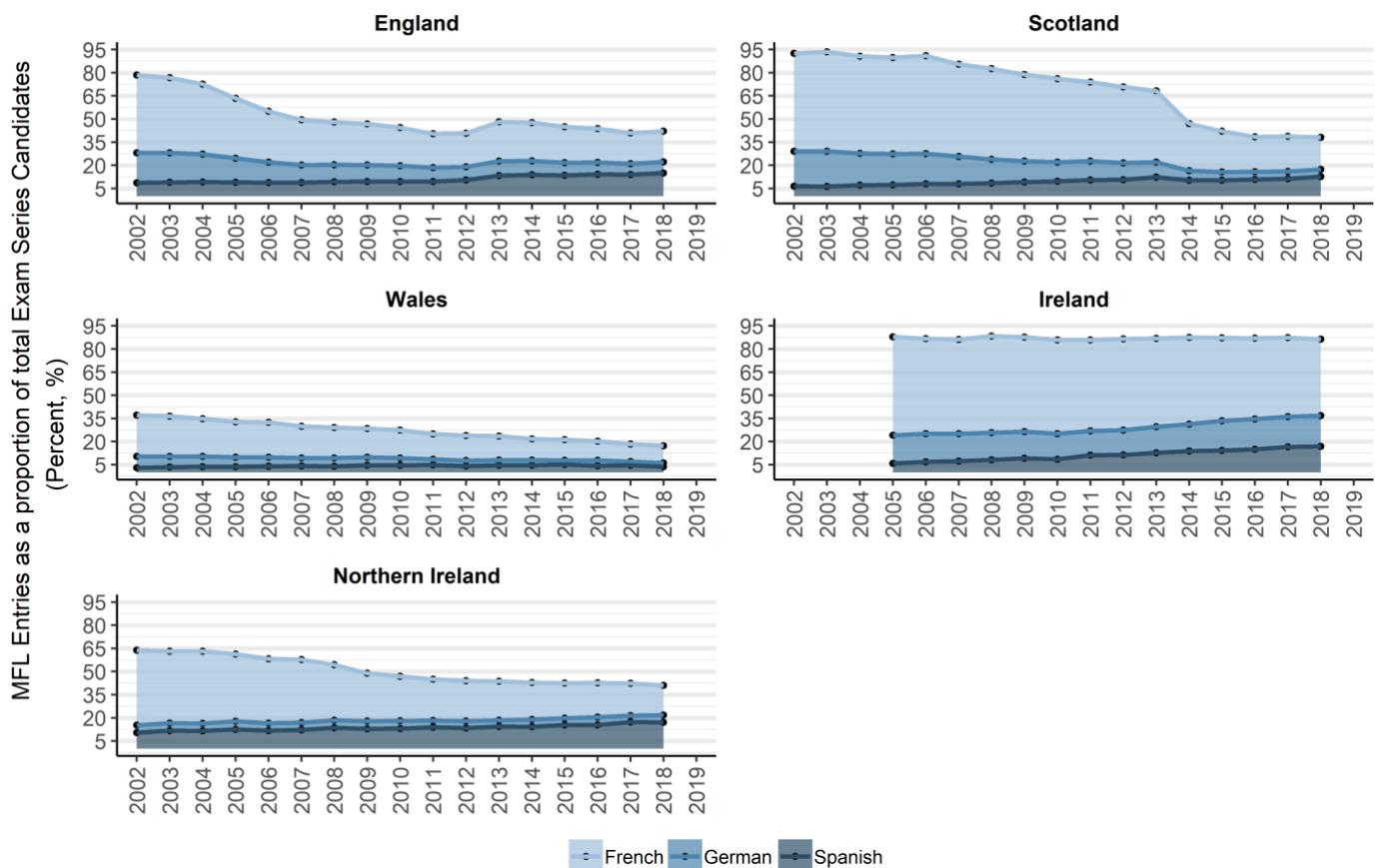


Figure 10. Proportion of the number of candidates in each exam series between 2002 and 2018 who took French, German or Spanish at GCSE or equivalent level. Graphs show cumulative proportions for French, German and Spanish in each year. Exam entry data extracted from JCQ GCSE main results tables for summers 2002-2018 for England, Northern Ireland and Wales; from Scottish Qualification Authority annual statistical reports 2002-2018 for Scotland; Irish State Examination Commission annual state examination statistics 2005-2018 Ireland. Total candidate in exam series estimated from ONS mid-2001 to mid-2018 detailed time-series estimates of UK population (aged 16 only) for England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

As can be seen in figure 11, the trends for the proportion of candidates entering into each MFL subject exam, again, mirrors that of the counts presented for each country in figures 1-5. The proportion of candidates entering French exams at GCSE (or equivalent) level is falling in all countries. This drop in entries is most dramatic in UK countries, while Ireland shows a more gradual decrease. Ireland also shows increasing entries to German exams, while the UK countries show generally decreasing entries to this language. All countries show an increase in the proportion of students entered for Spanish exams.

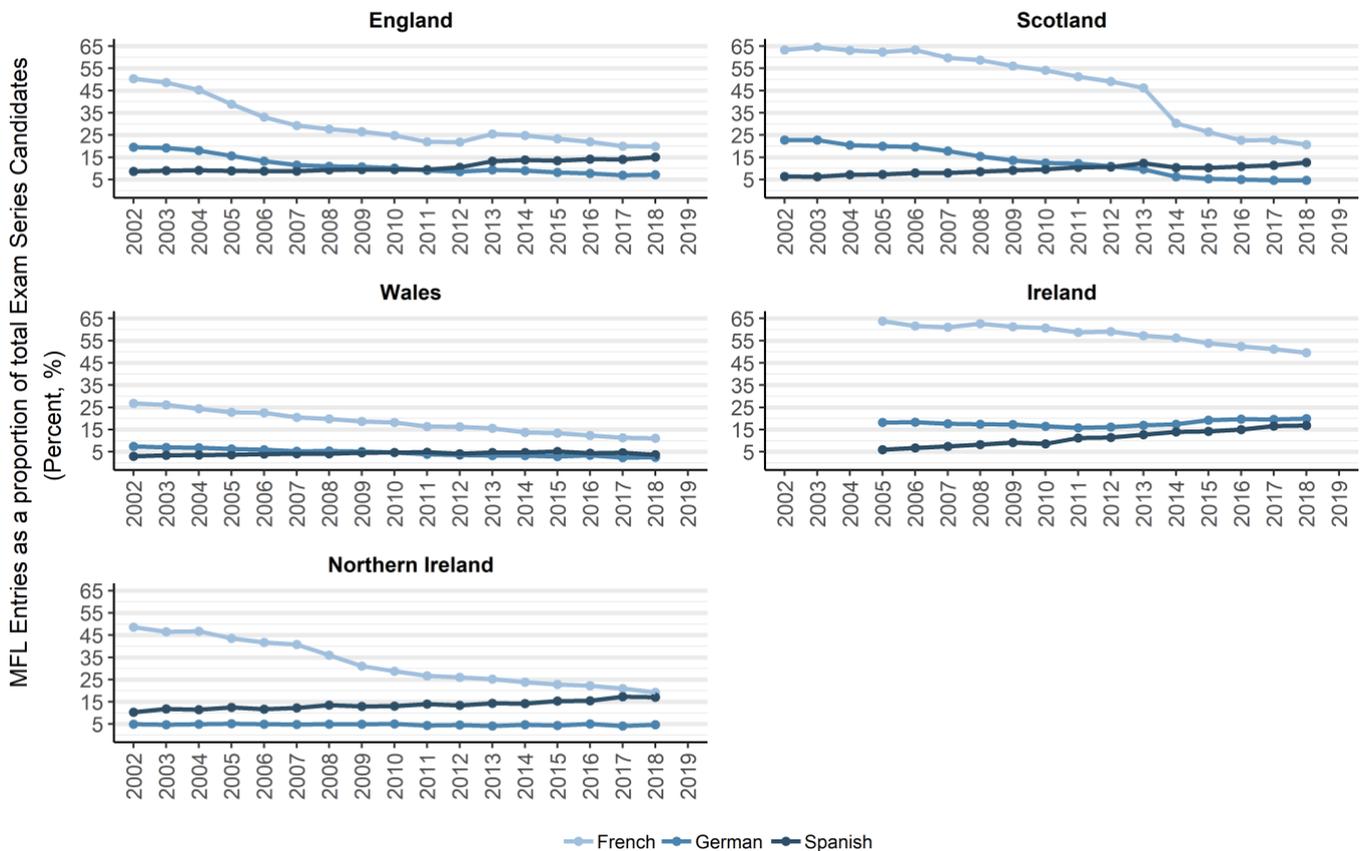


Figure 11. Proportion of the number of candidates in each exam series between 2002 and 2018 who took French, German or Spanish at GCSE or equivalent level. Exam entry data extracted from JCQ GCSE main results tables for summers 2002-2018 for England, Northern Ireland and Wales; from Scottish Qualification Authority annual statistical reports 2002-2018 for Scotland; Irish State Examination Commission annual state examination statistics 2005-2018 Ireland. Total candidate in exam series estimated from ONS mid-2001 to mid-2018 detailed time-series estimates of UK population (aged 16 only) for England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Comparison to A level entries

A potential consequence of lower exam entries to GCSE MFL subjects is a reduction in the number of students progressing to study a language at A level. To provide insight into this potential consequence we collected data for A level entries in England, which are reported below.

Entries to MFL A levels in England show similar trends to entries in MFL GCSE subjects, shown in figure 1. However, the rate of decline in French and German A levels does not seem quite as pronounced. Like at GCSE, Spanish A level entries in England have been steadily increasing. This resulted in Spanish A level entries being greater than German and French A level entries in 2005 and 2019, respectively.

Overall, entries to A level MFL subjects have shown a reduction of just over one fifth from 2002 to 2019, as shown in the bottom graph of figure 12. This may suggest declining entries at GCSE have had minimal impact on entries to A level exams.

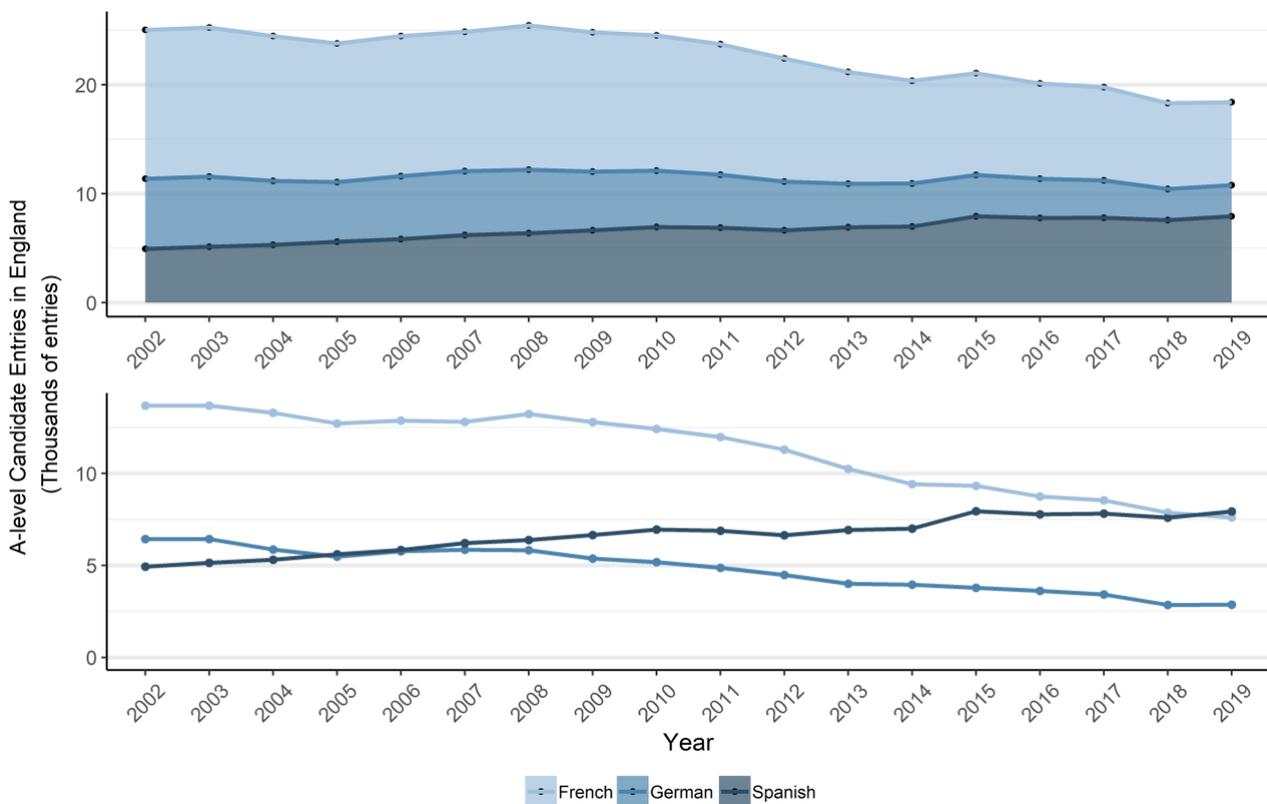


Figure 12. Number of entries for French, German and Spanish A level exams between 2002 and 2019 in England. The top graph shows combined enrolments to French, German and Spanish in each year, whilst the bottom graph shows enrolments for individual subjects. Data extracted from JCQ A level main results tables for summers 2002-2019.

To further explore the relationship between declining entries at GCSE and entries at A level, the proportion of students progressing from GCSE to A level was estimated. This figure was calculated by assuming the students who progress to A level would have been entered into their GCSE exam 2 years prior to the A level exam date. Therefore, the proportion of students progressing would be calculated by dividing the total A level entries by the total GCSE entries 2 years earlier (for example, the number of A level entries in 2019 divided by number of GCSE entries in 2017). Figure 13 shows this data for GCSE exams which were sat between 2002 and 2017 and therefore A level exams sat between 2004 and 2019. The figure also shows the proportion of candidates progressing to A level for other subjects to allow comparison between subjects.

Between 2002 to 2012 (GCSE years) the proportion of students progressing to A level shows a gradual increase in all subjects, with the exception of religious studies which has shown a constant gradual decline. Following this, subjects have either shown a slight decline or a maintenance of the proportion of candidates progressing to A level. This trend is more pronounced in art & design, history and geography than in French, German and Spanish.

Overall the proportion of students progressing to MFL A level subjects appears relatively stable, and for French and German showed a net increase between the years 2002 to 2017 (GCSE years). In other words, while fewer learners are taking GCSEs in MFL, this is not proportionately impacting upon uptake for A level.

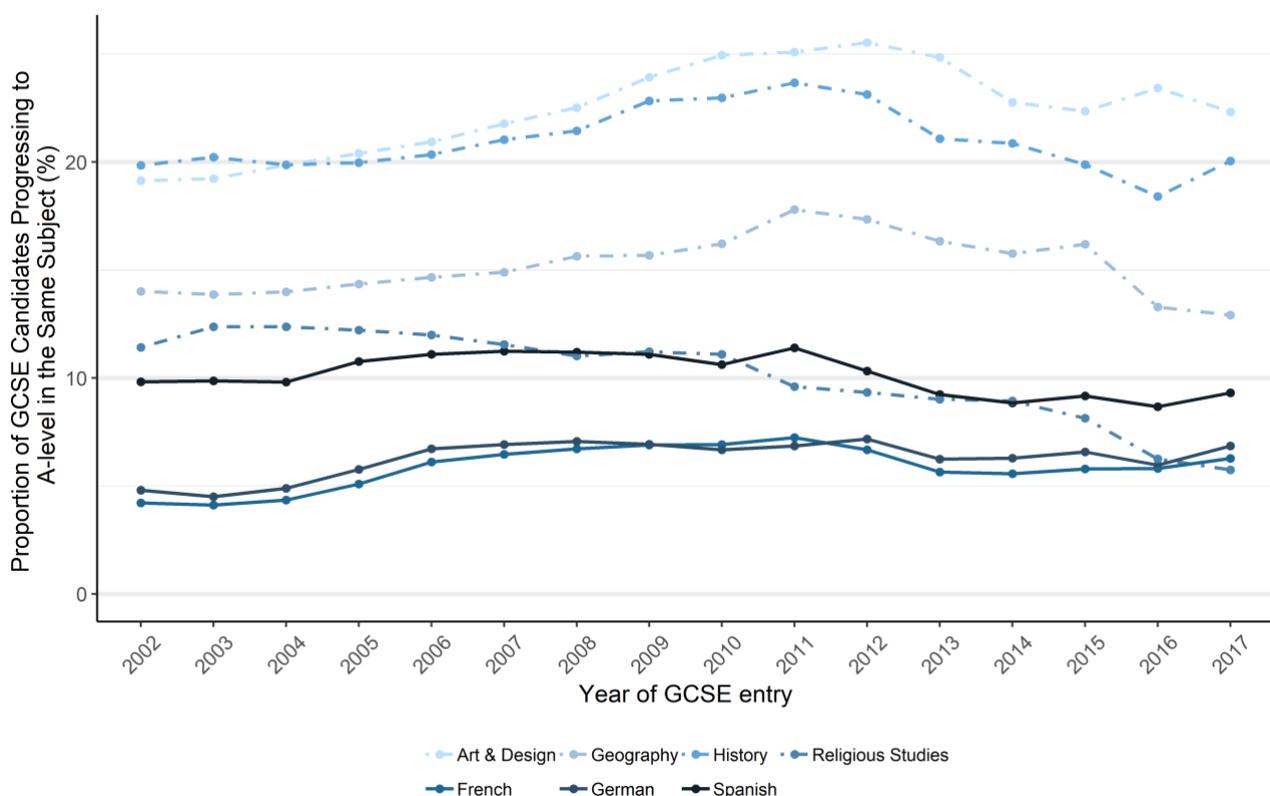


Figure 13. Proportion of GCSE candidates progressing to A level. A level figures are taken from two years following GCSE entry year (assuming the cohorts are the same candidates). Data extracted from JCQ, GCSE and A level main results tables for summers 2002-2019

Summary

Data presented in this report demonstrate trends showing an overall reduction in entries to GCSE (or equivalent) level modern foreign language (MFL) exams. The MFL subjects included in our reporting are French, German and Spanish. Other MFL subjects make up a minority of entries and comparable data in other countries may not be available.

We see in the figures presented, that MFL entry trends in England are also seen in other anglophone countries. This pattern is similar across countries in the UK and New Zealand. Conversely, MFL entries at this level in Ireland and Australia show a different trend; a slight increase or overall maintenance in entries. Data from the USA and Canada are not directly comparable to other data collected due to their differences in collection methods or categorisation of candidates.

Our estimation of the proportion of the total GCSE (or equivalent) exam population who enter into French, German or Spanish exams shows that England is comparable to other countries in the UK in terms of the proportion of students entered for these exams. These conclusions may be limited due to the validity of the dataset used to estimate the total exam population in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. It is possible that the proportions may have been underestimated due to the reasons previously outlined.

We have also described how entries to A level MFL subjects have changed in a similar pattern to GCSE entries in England. However, despite falling GCSE entries in England there appears to be limited impact on the proportion of students progressing to A levels in these subjects. When comparing the proportion of students progressing from GCSE to A level between MFL subjects and other subjects, MFL subjects appear to be below that of art & design, geography and history. However, this value has been relatively consistent over the last 15 years, so may be influenced by other factors not outlined.

This report does not explore or explain the reasons behind the changes in trends but does demonstrate that these patterns are not unique to England.



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