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Languages fade as pupils opt for science

By Chris Cook, Education Correspondent
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British school children are opting to **take more science exams**, but are cutting back on languages, Tuesday's GCSE results reveal. The proportion of these qualifications receiving a good grade rose for the 23rd consecutive year.

Pupils are continuing to shift away from integrated science qualifications in favour of separate science qualifications. Exam entries for the biology, chemistry and physics courses have each risen by about 29,000 since last year – a jump of well over a quarter – while the numbers sitting exams for integrated science qualifications has fallen.

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Hilary Leavers, assistant director of the Campaign for Science and Engineering said: "The dramatic rises in the numbers of students taking biology, physics and chemistry GCSEs is brilliant news. Numbers have increased almost a third on last year and have doubled from 2007. As many as 16 per cent of all students may have taken triple-science GCSEs this year."

Richard Lambert, CBI director-general, greeted the rise in science learning, but called for the government to improve opportunities to learn science in state schools. He said "pupils, parents and teachers should know that triple science offers the best preparation for A-level science and a whole range of careers. No one wants gifted young people to miss out on future opportunities because they leave science behind at GCSE."

Last year, fewer than half of all state schools offered physics, chemistry and biology as separate GCSEs. In 2009, only 10 per cent of comprehensive school pupils sat separated science exams, while 57 per cent did so in grammar schools and 33 per cent did at private schools

Total entries for modern language GCSEs, excluding Irish and Welsh, fell by 4.1 per cent to 348,191. Since 2004, when foreign languages ceased to be compulsory for secondary school students of more than 14 years old, the number of entries for GCSE language qualifications has fallen by one third. French, the most popular language, has now fallen out of the 10 top subjects.

As was the case with last week's A-level results, Spanish was the only widely taught language to grow this year. Entries for some less-commonly taught languages GCSEs rose strongly, however. The number of GCSEs in Mandarin rose by 5.2 per cent to 3,648.

Entries in Polish continued to soar, increasing by 12 per cent to 4,087. This is likely to have been driven by immigration from Poland following the country's accession to the European Union in 2004. In that year, only 323 students took a GCSE in the language.

The proportion of GCSEs, normally taken by 16-year-olds in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, that were awarded a C grade or above rose once again, reaching 69.1 per cent. A little more than one fifth of the entries were awarded an A or A* grade.

The attainment gap between private schools and the state sector has changed little since last year. More than half of the entries from independent schools were awarded an A or A*, compared to fewer than a fifth of the GCSEs awarded to comprehensive school students.

Nick Gibb, the schools minister, said that "while celebrating individual success and welcoming the fact that there has been an enormous take-up of GCSEs in the individual sciences, we believe that more needs to be done to close the attainment

Spanish bucks languages trend

Britons are becoming ever more monoglot, writes **Chris Cook**. Entries for language GCSEs have fallen by one third since languages ceased to be compulsory in secondary schools for over-14s.

Entries for French, long the country's most popular foreign language, have halved since 2002. The number of pupils taking German has followed a similar trajectory.

Spanish is the only widely taught language to see any growth. In 2002, some 58,000 students studied the language. This year nearly 68,000 sat GCSEs in the language – only a shade fewer than took German.

GCSE entries for some less-commonly taught languages rose strongly, however. Pupils taking exams for Mandarin rose 5.2 per cent to 3,648 – a 38 per cent increase in the number of young Britons studying the language since 2002.

Over the same period entries for Japanese have doubled. Arabic has also enjoyed strong growth: the number of pupils sitting exams in the subject have risen about 80 per cent.

But the big winner in recent years has been Polish. Entries for the language soared this year, rising 12 per cent to more than 4,000.

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gap between those from the poorest and wealthiest backgrounds. The continued success of academies in some of the most challenging areas of the country shows what can be done.”

The government intends to **expand the number of academies**, schools run by private groups but funded by the taxpayer, in order to inject more competition and choice into the education system. At the moment, there are 203 such schools. A further 153 existing state schools under local authority control have applied to convert to become academies in time for the new education year beginning in September.

This has been driven by immigration to the UK from Poland following the country's accession to the European Union in 2004. In that year, only 323 students took a GCSE in the language.

Polish is now the sixth most commonly studied language GCSE after French, German, Spanish, Italian and Urdu – widely studied and spoken by Britons of Pakistani origin.

Economics was one of the fastest-growing GCSEs. Entries increased by 6 per cent to 3,074. The subject is one of the most gender-unbalanced. More than 70 per cent of the entries are from boys.

The exam success gap between genders continued to grow. The proportion of qualifications awarded to girls that received the A or A* grade increased to 25.5 per cent, compared to 19.5 per cent for boys. This gap is 0.3 percentage points wider than it was in 2009.

Chris Keates, general secretary of NASUWT, a teachers' union, said: “These fantastic results stand in stark contrast to some of the worst ever employment and training prospects for young people and the reality of rising youth unemployment as a result of the coalition government's austerity programme.”

Department for Education's statistics list 10 per cent of all 16 to 18-year-olds as being not in employment education or training. Unemployment among 16 to 17-year-olds who are looking for work is now at 33 per cent. The equivalent figure stands at 17.5 per cent for 18 to 24-year-olds.

Miles Templeman, director-general of the Institute of Directors, said a lack of skills was “holding back business growth and impeding organisations' ability to capitalise on economic recovery”.

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