

Policy Note 75 | September 2026

Language GCSEs in English schools: a postcode lottery?

Megan Bowler, University of Oxford

Introduction

In July 2026, the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) published a school performance table based on the average number of Modern Languages GCSEs taken per pupil at the end of Key Stage 4 in 2025, accompanied by supplementary information that included data on Classical Languages.¹ The purpose, as explained by HEPI's Chief Executive, Nick Hillman OBE, was to celebrate those schools that had been 'bucking the trend' of declining language provision.²

Since languages ceased to be compulsory for pupils aged 14 to 16 from 2004, formal language education now ends at 14 for most school pupils in England.³ Five of the six least popular subject categories for A-Level entries are languages.⁴ By contrast, 97.9 per cent of upper secondary pupils in the EU study at least one foreign language.⁵ Key Stage 4 (when students are typically 14-to-16 years old) is a critical drop-off point for the languages 'pipeline', and the data indicate that opportunities to pursue languages in schools vary significantly across the country. Very few pupils continue with languages after the age of 16:⁶ opportunities to pursue languages at A-Level are often limited due to minimum cohort requirements,⁷ and provision varies considerably by region.⁸

Average per-pupil GCSE uptake across schools in England is a useful metric for assessing which pupils are participating in language learning and having their achievements recognised via mainstream qualifications. Further, mapping the data on average per-pupil GCSE language uptake by Local Educational Authority (LEA) in England can help to identify how these trends vary by region and across different languages, and to pinpoint key areas to target with further support and outreach.

Nick Hillman's analysis noted two caveats:

- ▶ The GCSE take-up data are based on official school performance measures, which exclude other qualifications, most notably international GCSEs (IGCSEs).⁹ A small number of schools, mostly within the independent sector, nonetheless opt for IGCSE qualifications.
- ▶ The metric also gives equal weighting to languages taught in school and to languages learned outside of school, which are often 'home, heritage and community languages' (HHCLs).¹⁰ It is clearly positive that language learning happens outside formal school environments as well as

within them, and also that schools are supporting pupils who undertake such study, including by entering them for formal qualifications. However, we cannot differentiate how and where pupils are learning the languages in which they are sitting GCSEs, beyond the fact that French, Spanish and German are primarily taught in schools, and a high proportion of exams categorised as ‘Other MFL’ are taken by HHCL learners.

Stark regional differences

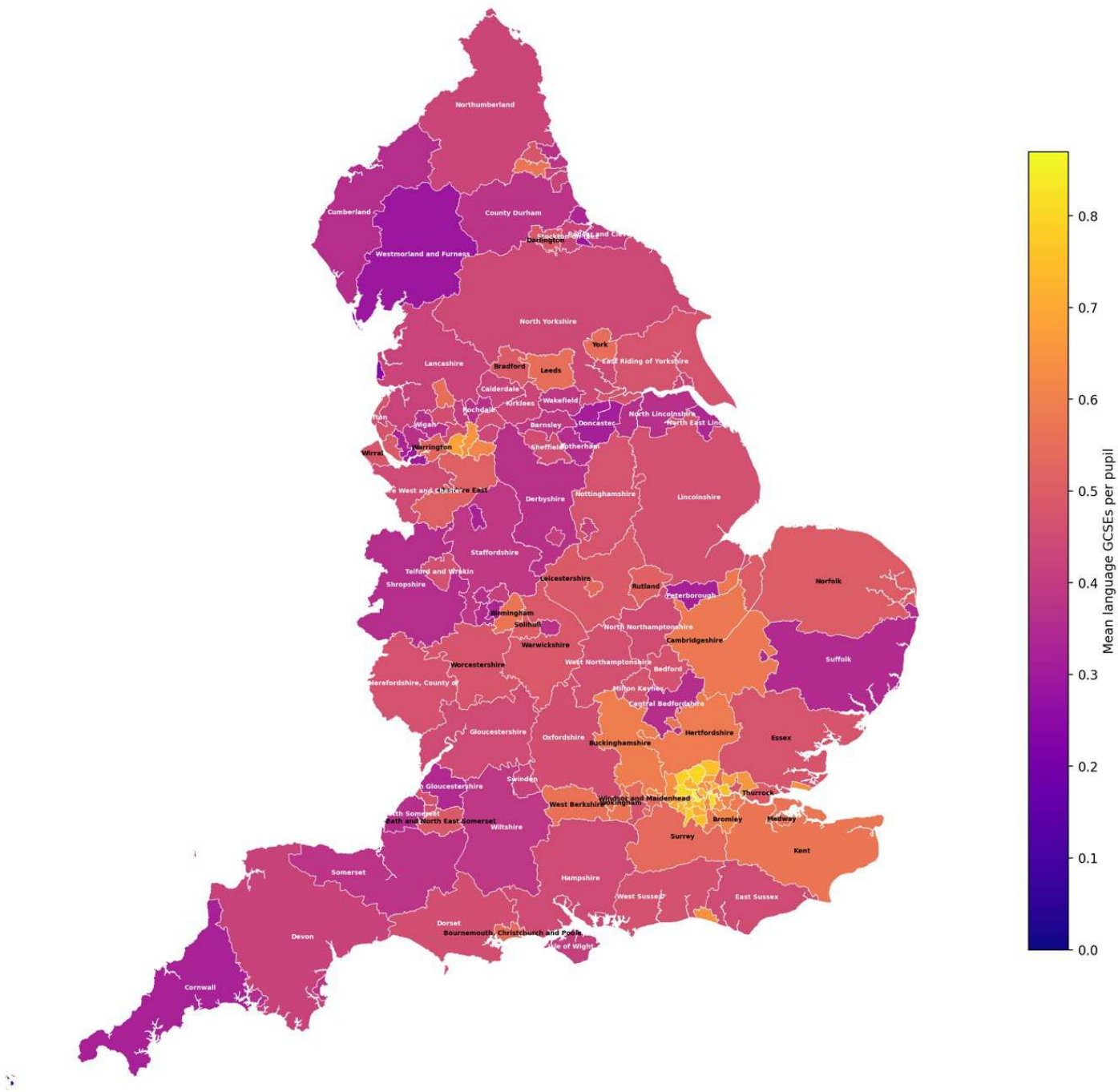
No region of England approaches close to one language GCSE entry per pupil; in fact, the average for the whole of England is one Language GCSE for every two pupils, compared to almost two science GCSEs for every one pupil.

Mean uptake of languages GCSEs per pupil in 2025

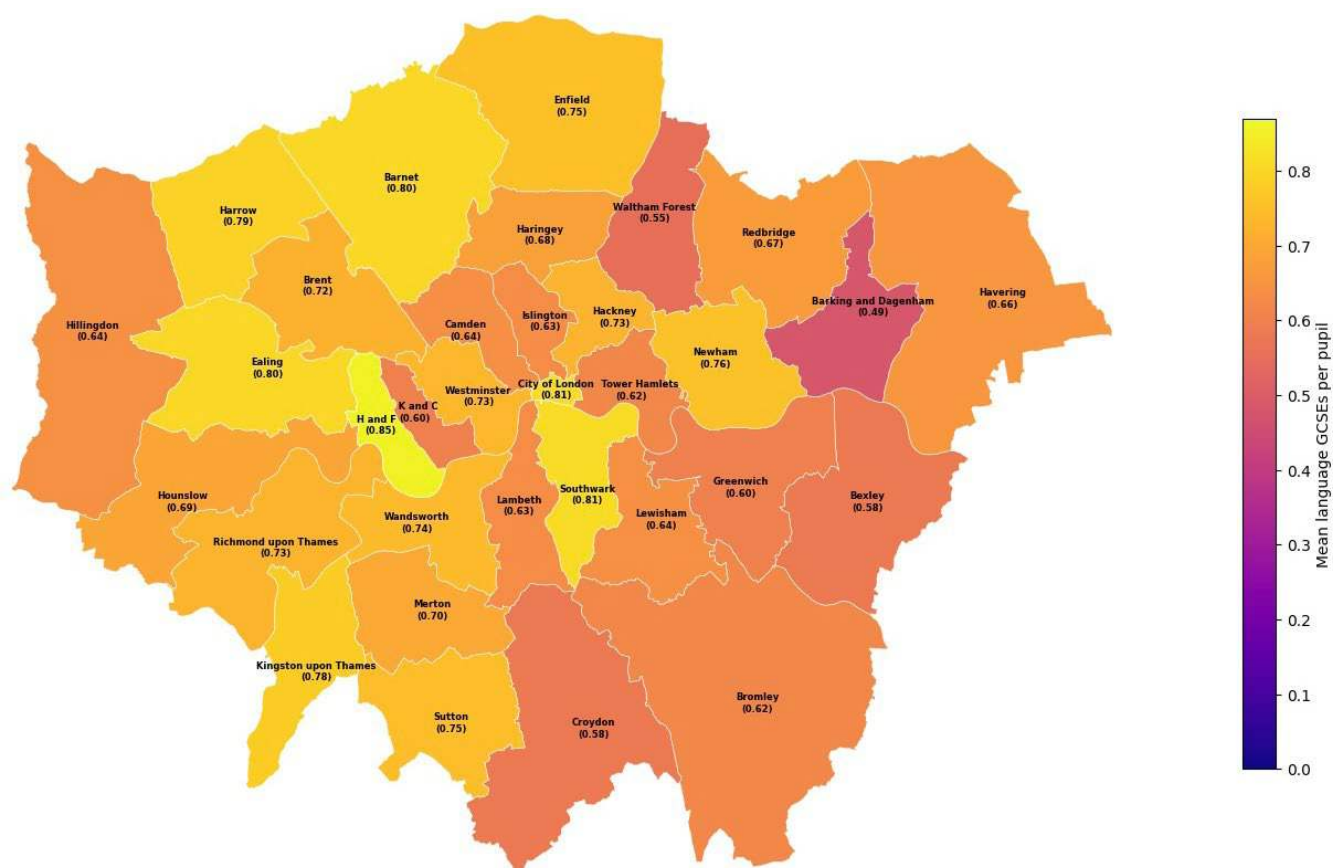
Region	All schools
London	0.69
South East	0.52
South West	0.42
East	0.50
East Midlands	0.46
West Midlands	0.45
Yorkshire and the Humber	0.45
North West	0.47
North East	0.42
England	0.50

There are stark disparities between different LEA areas. While not all of London’s boroughs perform equally well, it is notable that Language GCSE qualifications are particularly concentrated in Greater London, with an average of 0.69 language GCSEs per pupil compared to 0.42 in the South West and North East.¹¹

Mean entries for GCSE languages per pupil by LEA¹²

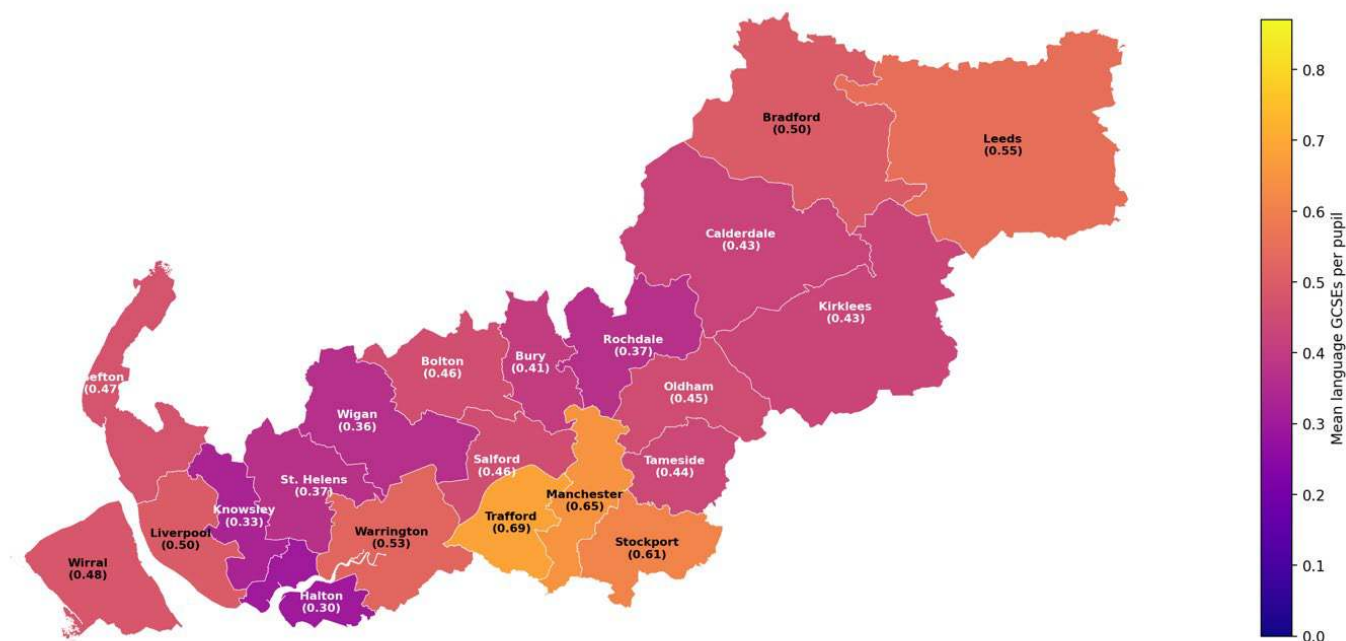


Mean entries for GCSE languages per pupil by LEAs in London (H and F stands for Hammersmith and Fulham, and K and C for Kensington and Chelsea)



Parts of the North West score relatively well. Overall, it is notable that multicultural urban LEAs have higher levels of participation than surrounding rural areas.

Mean entries for GCSE languages per pupil by LEAs in the Liverpool, Manchester and Leeds corridor



Higher participation tends to be seen in more affluent areas. The top 25 LEAs for GCSE language participation are all London boroughs, with the exception of Trafford (18th, 0.69), Manchester (22nd, 0.65) and Brighton and Hove (23rd, 0.64). There is a significant gap between the LEA with the highest level of participation, Hammersmith and Fulham (0.86), and those with the lowest.

LEAs with the lowest mean uptake of languages GCSEs per pupil in 2025

1	Isles of Scilly*	0.14
2	Blackpool	0.24
3	Westmorland and Furness	0.29
4	Middlesbrough	0.29
5	Halton	0.30
6	Doncaster	0.32
7	Peterborough	0.32
8	Cornwall	0.33
9	Stoke-on-Trent	0.33
10	Knowsley	0.33
11	Sandwell	0.33
12	Hartlepool	0.33
13	North East Lincolnshire	0.35
14	South Gloucestershire	0.35
15	Suffolk	0.35
16	Dudley	0.36
17	Rotherham	0.36
18	Shropshire	0.36
19	Cumberland	0.36
20	Central Bedfordshire	0.36
21	Plymouth	0.36
22	Wigan	0.36
23	North Somerset	0.37
24	Rochdale	0.37
25	Wolverhampton	0.37

* Based on 1 school of 22 entrants

Inequalities of school type and school policy

The data indicate that low participation in languages is increasingly the norm at Key Stage 4. Only 7.9 per cent of schools (7.2 per cent of state, and 10.2 per cent of independent schools) have pupils taking an average of at least one language at GCSE. For non-selective state schools, the figure drops to just 4.2 per cent.

These low rates of participation are not indicative of a lack of appetite for language-learning, but of school leaders and pupils responding to the (lack of) incentives they have been given. First,

languages are perceived as more difficult than other subjects. Languages GCSE exams continue to be severely marked, though in 2026 there was a very slight increase in the percentage of pupils achieving grades 7 to 9 with the introduction of the new Modern Foreign Language (MFL) GCSE specifications.¹³ From a school performance perspective, this means that languages are often viewed as a risk and as a subject primarily for academic high-achievers. Likewise, language teacher recruitment has been increasingly challenging, which may further limit the viability of languages even where a school is keen to maintain or increase provision.¹⁴

The divide between state and independent schools is not clear-cut. State schools frequently outperform independent schools in their local area for language GCSEs, with the important caveat that some independent schools offer IGCSEs that are not represented in the performance data. Participation is variable across the independent sector, though these schools are often better able to protect language provision when numbers are unstable.¹⁵

A more consistent driver of disparity between schools is academic selectivity.¹⁶ Average participation in languages at GCSE *doubles* in grammar schools (1.00), where a GCSE in a language is commonly compulsory for all, compared to 0.48 in comprehensive schools and 0.50 in independent schools (more than half of which are non-selective).¹⁷

Variations in school-level policy play a decisive role in this varied picture of language participation at Key Stage 4, yet schools where languages are optional rather than core subjects disproportionately serve disadvantaged communities.¹⁸ Where languages are on offer, school policies fall broadly into three types:

- 】 languages are a compulsory GCSE subject for all;
- 】 languages are a compulsory GCSE subject for selected pupils, creating a 'pathway' on the basis of predicted academic attainment; or
- 】 languages are a free choice for all pupils at GCSE.

Research suggests motivation and positive attitudes towards languages improve when all pupils are treated the same, either through universal compulsion or completely free choice.¹⁹ The other option of selecting and deselecting specific pupils negatively affects the motivation of both groups, and results in the highest participation gap for disadvantaged pupils and pupils with Special Educational Needs and / or Disabilities (SEND).²⁰

In any case, student motivation to choose and succeed in languages at GCSE also depends on positive experiences at Key Stage 3, yet this pre-GCSE stage is often overlooked. Giving teachers the autonomy to deliver creative and engaging approaches that suit their learners, and ensuring a smooth transition from primary school to secondary school, are important for encouraging student continuation.

Case Study: Bexley Grammar School (2.09 per-pupil average)

Bexley Grammar School have achieved the highest national average of language uptake (modern and classical) at GCSE. Their success in languages is driven by school policy and curriculum time, and underpinned by an ethos that languages are fundamentally 'doable and worth doing'.

Pupils begin with Latin and either French or German in Year 7. In Year 8, they choose a second Modern Foreign Languages (MFL): Spanish, Italian, Russian, Japanese or Mandarin Chinese; they can also choose Classical Greek as an extracurricular activity. For GCSE, all pupils continue with French / German and with either their second MFL or Latin (or both).

Languages receive a substantial allocation of time in the Key Stage 3 curriculum. Modern language classes have a practical focus and emphasise oral communication in the target language. Teachers have found that this immersive approach counters the idea that languages are difficult or not useful, as making progress in speaking a language boosts pupils' enjoyment and motivation.

Which other factors explain schools with high participation?

Besides academic selectivity (and a small number of specialist European schools offering bilingual education), some other patterns can be observed among schools with the highest levels of recognised language participation at GCSE.

- **Academies with a 'high expectations' culture:** non-selective academies with high academic standards for all pupils, which are particularly concentrated in London and often have high proportions of pupils with English as an additional language (EAL), tend to have a high number of language GCSE entries.
- **Faith schools:** Islamic faith schools frequently make Arabic and sometimes Urdu compulsory at GCSE. Likewise, Biblical Hebrew and / or Modern Hebrew are commonly taught in Jewish faith schools. In these cases, there is a clear narrative about the value of languages for religious and cultural heritage, particularly the ability to read scripture.
- **Former specialist language colleges:** the 'specialist schools programme' introduced by John Major and expanded by Tony Blair enabled schools to access more funding to specialise in languages. Though the scheme was discontinued in 2011, several schools which formerly held this status continue to maintain an emphasis on languages.
- **IB instead of A-Level:** schools which offer the broader International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma, in which pupils take six subjects including a language, benefit from a clearer rationale for prioritising languages at Key Stages 3 and 4. The defunding of the IB curriculum in the state sector, forcing some IB state schools to switch to the narrower A-Level curriculum, is expected to have a detrimental impact on uptake and reinforce socio-economic divides.

It is notable that selective and non-selective schools with a focus on EBacc (English Baccalaureate) attainment for all pupils were among those with the highest language GCSE participation in 2025. Low uptake of languages was a key factor in the failure to meet the target of 90 per cent of pupils following the EBacc curriculum by 2025.²¹ However, the EBacc was scrapped in November 2025 following the *Curriculum and Assessment Review*. This has removed one of the remaining incentives for school leaders to take languages seriously, and is likely to have a detrimental effect: some teachers report that the decision has already resulted in cuts to languages provision or to curriculum time at Key Stage 3 at their schools.²²

Case Study: Parkside Community College (1.31 per-pupil average)

Parkside Community College is a non-selective, co-educational academy in Cambridge; the School enters pupils for language GCSEs at nearly three times the comprehensive average. Pupils begin with French in Year 7 and Latin in Year 8, with the option to add Spanish via a dual MFL pathway. The majority of pupils continue with French at GCSE, while some take Spanish or Latin in addition.

Language teaching at Parkside reflects a commitment to a genuinely comprehensive ethos, and to the belief that progress in languages is attainable and worthwhile for all pupils, whether

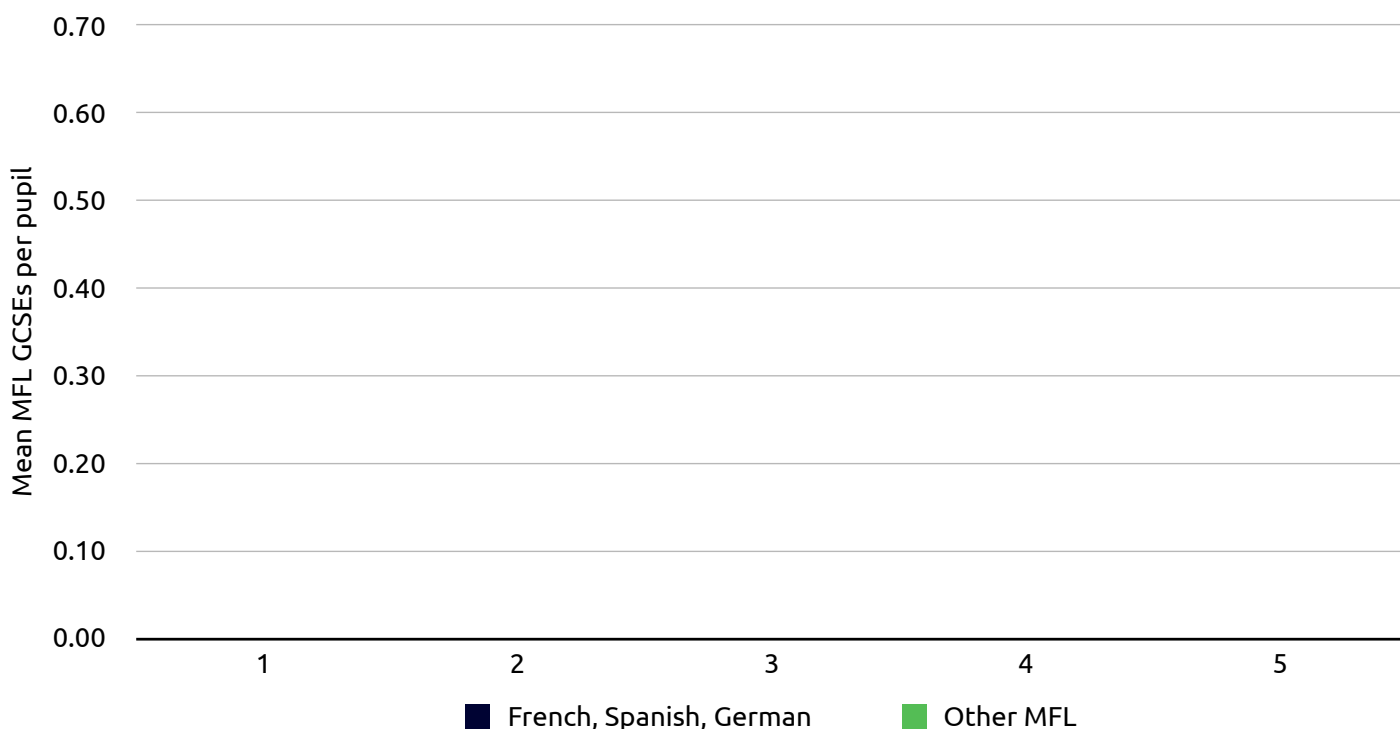
they are aiming to pass or to achieve top grades. The place of languages in the curriculum is underpinned by precise and deliverable educational outcomes at each Key Stage with transferable benefits for all pupils. For instance, languages support cognitive and memory skills, deductive reasoning, grammatical awareness, literacy and comprehension. In MFL, oracy and confidence in communication are valued in their own right rather than merely as preparation for assessment.

In Latin, a subject which is typically restricted to an academically selective or self-selective cohort, Katharine Radice's innovative methods have instead made the subject accessible. Curriculum design is carefully managed to ensure that limited lesson time is spent as efficiently as possible, and to identify an appropriate level of challenge to sustain motivation for the whole class. This helps to maximise the time spent on aspects that are most conducive to meaningful progress, such as a strong foundational knowledge of vocabulary and morphology.

The 'big three': French, Spanish and German

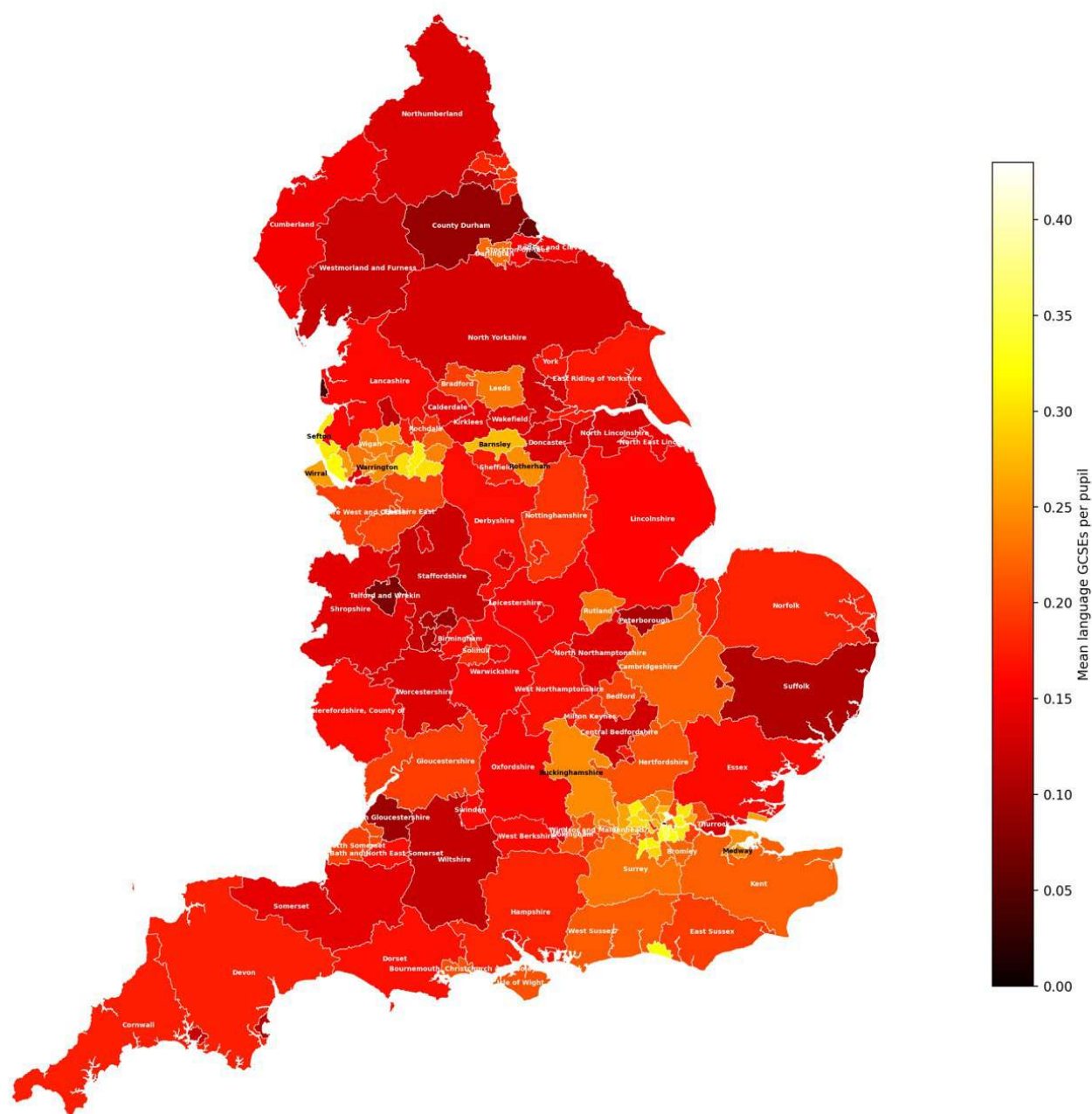
Unequal access to languages becomes particularly marked when we consider the three main Modern Foreign Languages that are formally taught in schools: French, Spanish, and German. The inequality between the Free School Meal (FSM) quintiles, which group schools by their proportion of pupils with FSM eligibility, is especially striking when considering GCSE entries in these three languages.²³ There is a per-pupil average of 0.57 in Quintile 1 (lowest deprivation), compared to 0.36 in Quintiles 4 and 5.

Mean uptake of GCSEs per pupil for French, Spanish and German in 2025 by school FSM quintile



Spanish and French

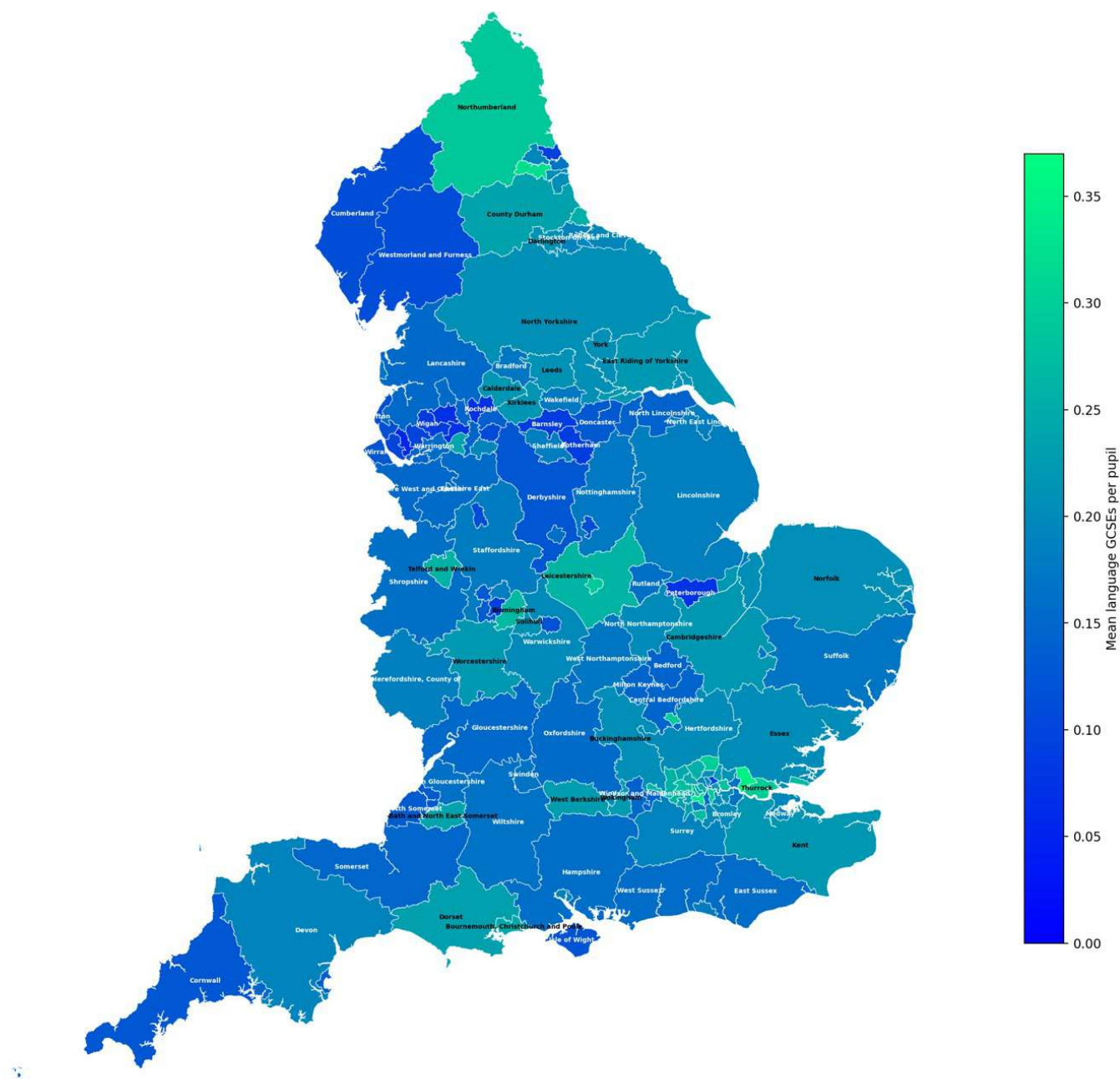
Mean entries for GCSE Spanish per pupil by LEA



Spanish, with 38.7 per cent of GCSE language entries, has now overtaken French, which has 37.6 per cent.²⁴ However, there is considerable variation at a regional level. The rise of Spanish is strongly concentrated in London, and it is also the more popular of the two languages in the North West. GCSE Spanish uptake is highest nationally in Hackney, due to a local decision to specialise in Spanish as the main taught language across all schools, supported by borough-wide teacher training and cultural activities.²⁵ Though the single-language emphasis comes at the cost of limiting variety, the approach has succeeded in ensuring a smoother primary-to-secondary transition, and has considerably boosted uptake at GCSE and A-Level. The Hackney model demonstrates the benefits of co-ordination between local authorities, experts and school leaders to sustain a target vision for language education.

In contrast, there is a more consistent regional spread for French. Entries for GCSE French have remained higher than for Spanish in the North East and East. Gateshead, Northumberland, Leicester, Luton and Thurrock are among the LEAs with the highest levels of French. The highest overall uptake is in London, particularly in Havering, Wandsworth and Enfield.

Mean entries for GCSE French per pupil by LEA

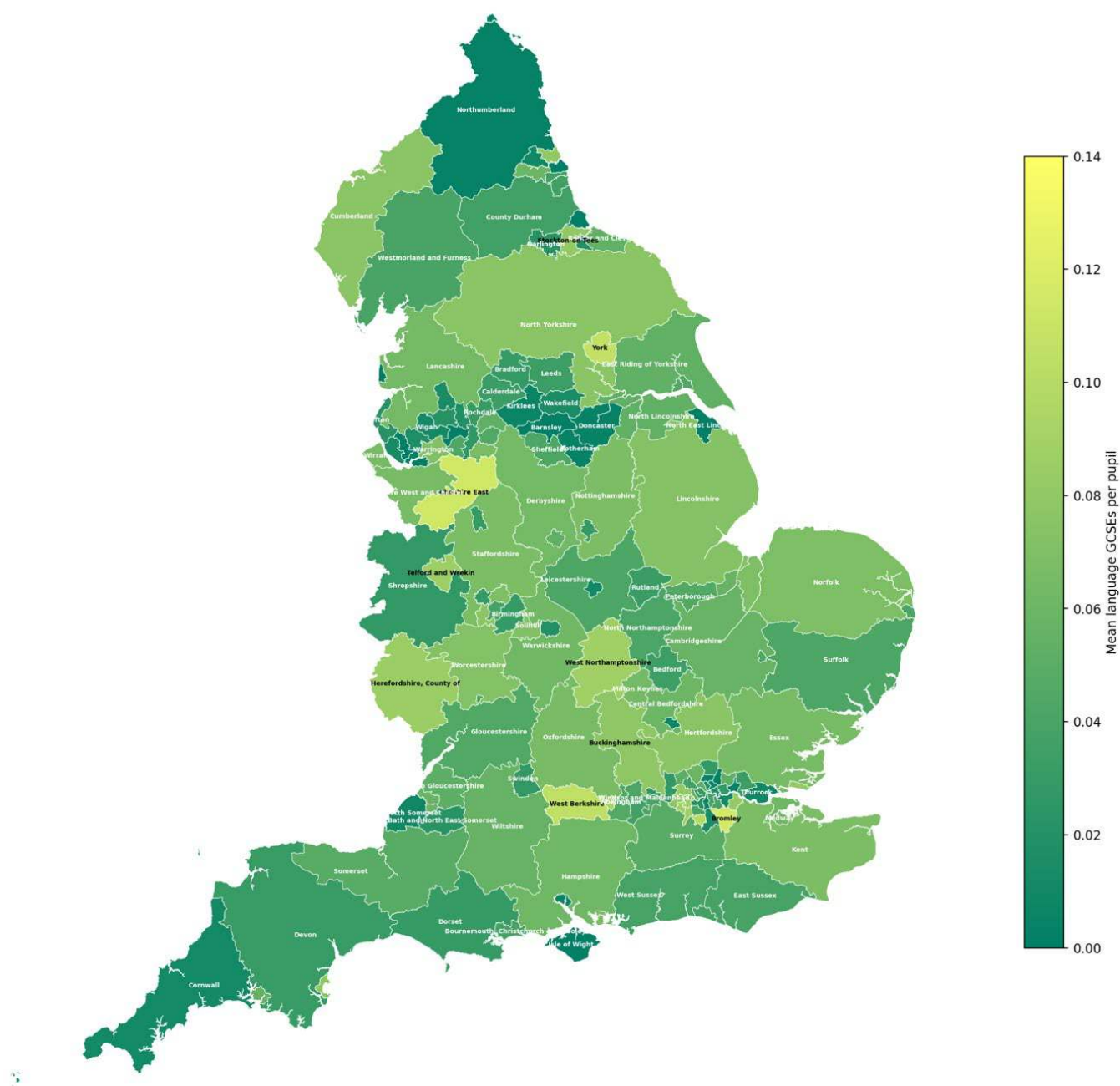


German

German is the third most popular language at GCSE and continues to be the most sought-after language by employers across multiple industries.²⁶ However, it has a much lower uptake than French and Spanish, accounting for just 9.5 per cent of language entries, having experienced a steep decline.²⁷ German is the only language GCSE for which boys had more entries than girls (51 per cent male, compared with 55 per cent female for both French and Spanish, and 53 per cent female for Other MFL).²⁸

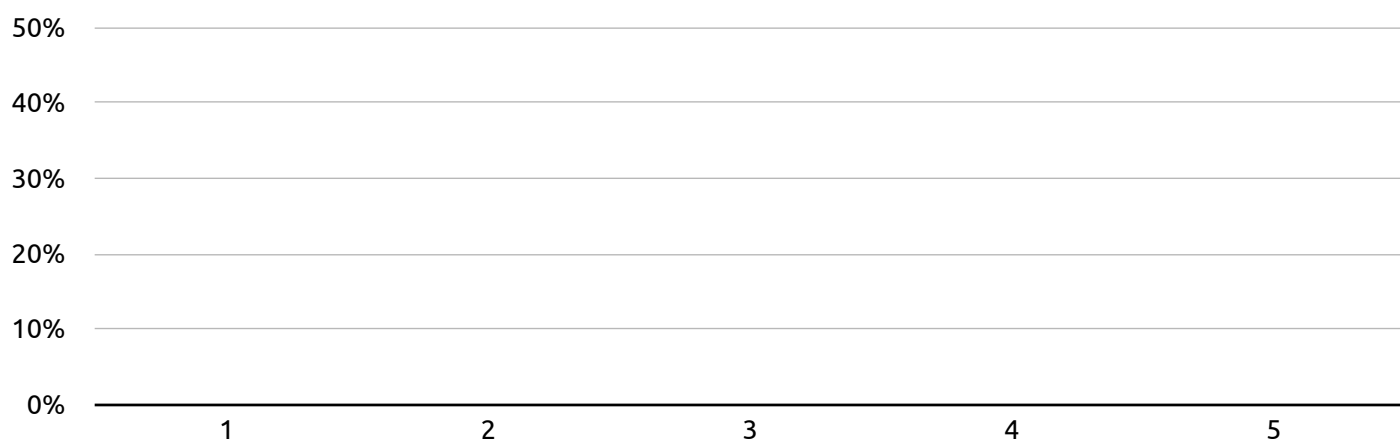
German is less prevalent in London, with a stronger presence in affluent suburban and rural LEAs. Seven LEAs recorded no entries for German GCSE, and 13 had no schools that entered more than five pupils.

Mean entries for GCSE German per pupil by LEA



A vicious cycle of declining uptake and opportunity in German has resulted in much bigger inequalities by socio-economic status and by academic selectivity than for French or Spanish. Provision of GCSE German is now scarce in non-selective state schools. Grammar schools have five times the average per-pupil entry number of comprehensive schools for German GCSE (0.21 compared to 0.04), and only 30 per cent of comprehensive schools enter any pupils for German. Just 3.8 per cent of schools in FSM Quintile 5 entered five or more pupils for GCSE German, compared to 45.4 per cent in Quintile 1. These represent significant gaps in educational opportunity.

Percentages of schools in each FSM quintile which entered at least five pupils for GCSE German in 2025



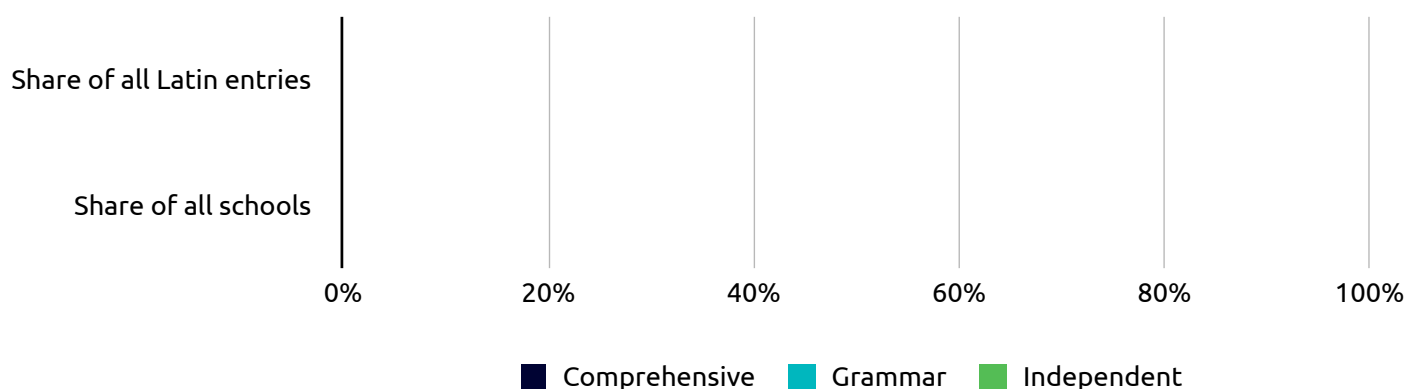
In terms of post-GCSE progression, German A-Level is often unviable in schools due to small pupil numbers and teacher shortages. It is promising that the Goethe-Institut and Languages for All are piloting the National German A-Level Class (NGAC), a consortium model which will deliver German A-Level classes via a more sustainable shared tuition model.²⁹

Classical languages

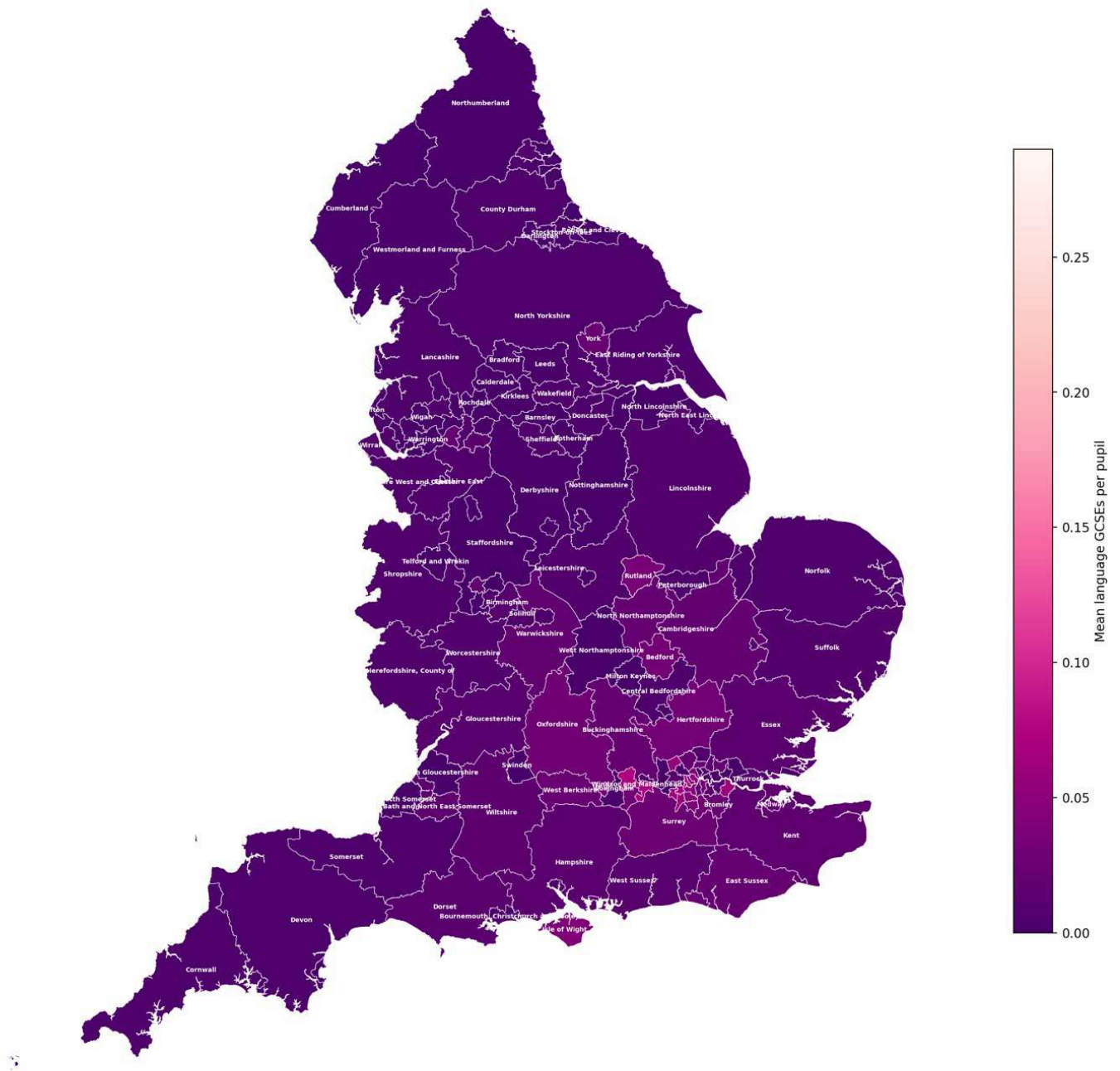
It is sensible to treat ancient languages alongside modern languages, particularly since Latin is the fourth most popular language at GCSE after Spanish, French and German.³⁰ Latin accounts for 85 per cent of classical languages taken at GCSE, followed by Classical Greek (9 per cent) and Biblical Hebrew (6 per cent). Classical language GCSEs are sometimes studied for externally rather than in school – for instance, through a tuition scheme facilitated by a local university – or might be taught in schools off-timetable (for example, as an extracurricular activity).³¹

Despite some growth of GCSE Latin in state schools, there remain significant divides between the independent and state sectors, and between grammar and comprehensive schools. Only 5.6 per cent of comprehensive schools (200 schools) entered any pupils for GCSE Latin in 2025, and 3.8 per cent (136 schools) entered at least five pupils. Only 46 entries for GCSE Classical Greek were from pupils at comprehensive schools, and 74 were from pupils at grammar schools. Thirty-three LEAs have no entries in Latin or Greek, and London and the South East have 3.1 times the average per-pupil GCSE entries in classical languages than the rest of England.

Percentage share of GCSE Latin entries by school type



Mean entries for GCSE Latin per pupil by LEA

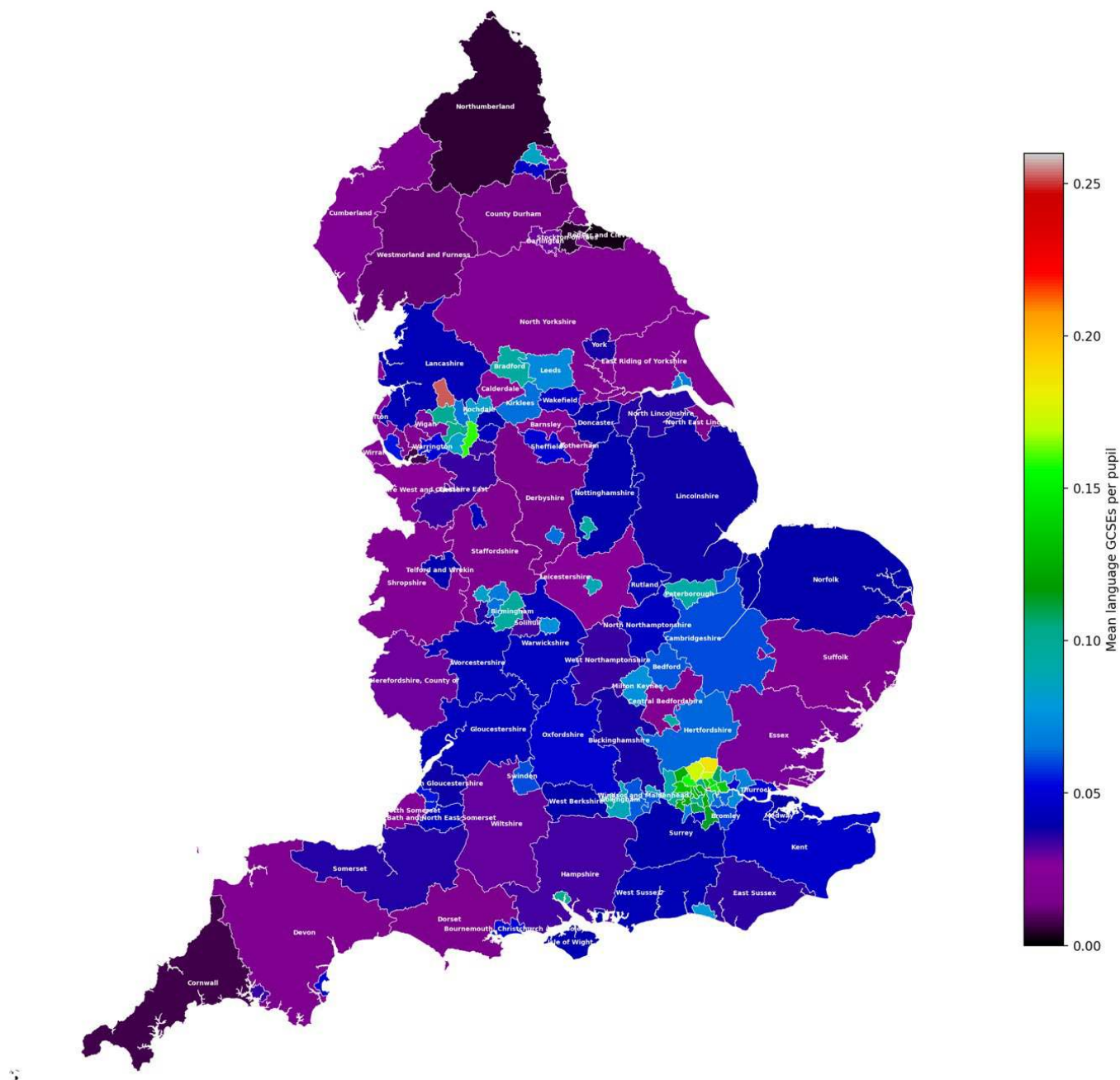


Classical organisations are developing innovative ways of improving access to these languages. For instance, regional hubs of the charity Classics for All are running free online Greek academies based in Cambridge and Liverpool. Classics for All and the Classical Association offer resources and training to help non-specialist teachers to deliver classical languages in state schools. The independent creation of the Intermediate Certificate in Classical Greek has also facilitated an additional pathway recognising language achievement at a lower level than GCSE, and is especially valuable for pupils learning outside the school curriculum and / or with a non-specialist teacher.³²

Other MFL

The category of 'Other MFL' accounts for 11.4 per cent of language entries at GCSE. Non-European languages tend to have a limited presence in school curricula, though the Mandarin Excellence Programme has enabled pupils across 76 state schools to study towards a GCSE in Mandarin Chinese.

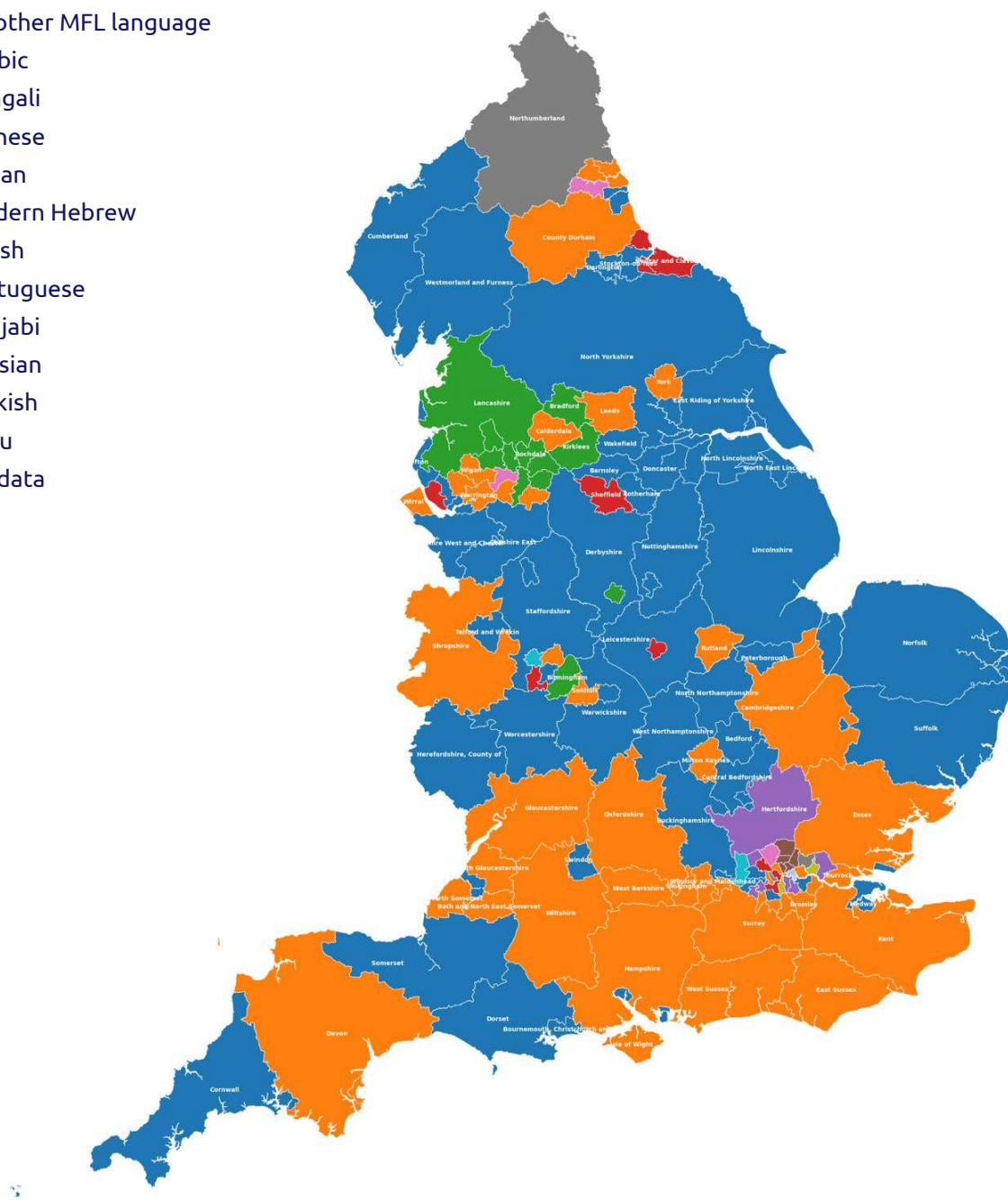
Mean entries for 'Other MFL' at GCSE per pupil by LEA



Recruiting specialist teachers is especially challenging for Other MFL. Pupils and teachers have also expressed concerns about very high grade boundaries for GCSEs in these languages, as school learners are graded on the same scale as a cohort that includes a high proportion of native speakers.³³ Adjustments to exam grading to ensure that school learners, external heritage learners and first-language candidates are treated equitably could encourage greater provision in schools, and increase the formal recognition of languages learned through external tuition (such as at community Saturday Schools).

Most popular 'Other MFL' at GCSE by LEA

Dominant other MFL language



Case Study: Dartford Grammar School for Boys (2.05 per-pupil average)

At Dartford Grammar School for Boys, languages are regarded as integral to the School's international outlook. They have made non-European languages a priority: pupils begin with Japanese or Mandarin Chinese in Year 7, then take up a European language (French, German, Spanish or Latin) in Year 8, before continuing with both at GCSE. The School is also maintaining the IB curriculum at post-16.

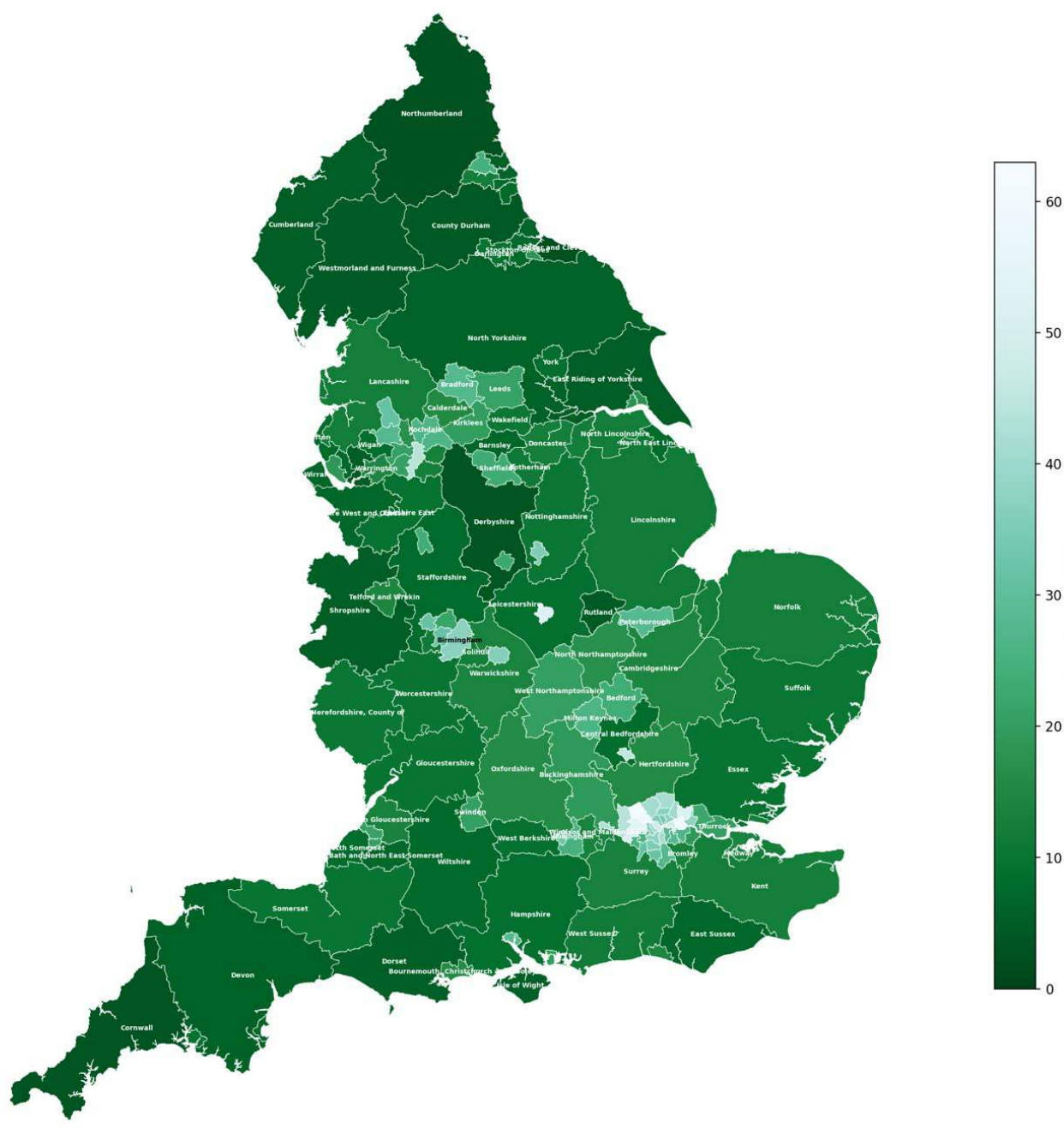
Japanese and Mandarin Chinese are often thought of as challenging GCSEs for non-native speakers, but pupils enjoy the process of getting to grips with the logic of an unfamiliar language and the emphasis on phonics. Supported by the Confucius Institute and Sakura Network, pupils take part in cultural activities, exchanges and school trips. Teaching emphasises a joined-up, comparative approach to languages, encouraging pupils to make connections and grammatical

comparisons across ancient, modern, European and non-European languages, and to understand their linguistic skills as transferable. The school also has a high proportion of pupils with HHCLs, who are encouraged to bring their own knowledge and identities as linguists into the classroom. In addition Dartford Grammar School co-leads the Wells Language Hub, a network to promote languages and good practice in language teaching across schools in Kent.

Home, heritage and community languages (HHCLs)

Overall entries in Other MFL have risen since the pandemic, suggesting that recognition of HHCLs and support in schools are improving.³⁴ At A-Level, Other MFL grew by 25.8 per cent between 2022 and 2026.³⁵ Some languages benefit from strong community networks: for instance, there are over 180 Polish Saturday Schools in the UK, which are especially geared towards GCSE and A-Level preparation as well as engagement with Polish culture and history.

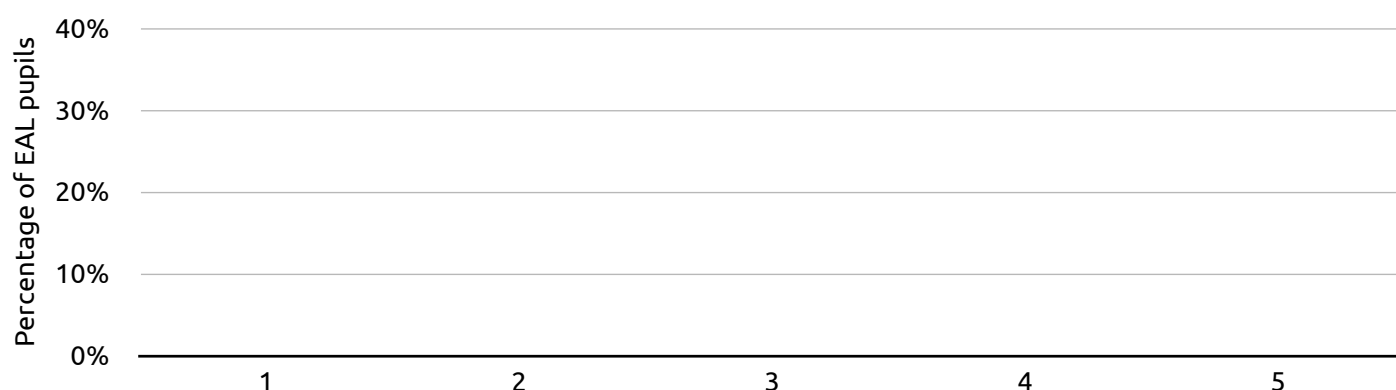
Percentage of state-school pupils believed to speak a language other than English as their first language by LEA³⁶



However, overall entries in Other MFL are still low, especially considering that 21.6 per cent of school pupils have a first language other than English.³⁷ This proportion rises by FSM Quintile, with 35.1 per cent in Quintile 5. The proportion of EAL (English as an Additional Language) students also varies considerably by region, ranging from 64.9 per cent in Newham to 2.8 per cent in Northumberland. Though EAL status does not always entail full literacy in another language, pupils' existing multilingualism evidently continues to be under-recognised in formal qualifications. Likewise, HHCL qualifications can sometimes be undervalued in educational settings and in higher education applications. Universities should give fair and transparent recognition to the growing numbers of GCSEs and A-Levels taken in HHCLs, rather than dismissing these as easy qualifications.³⁸

The under-recognition of these linguistic skills is in part because several major HHCLs in the UK do not have a GCSE pathway. For instance, there is no GCSE in Romanian, despite it being the third most common main language in England and Wales after English and Polish, and the second most common in London.³⁹ There is not a single GCSE in any African language.

Percentage of EAL pupils by pupil FSM Quintile in 2024/25



Conclusion

Zooming in on languages GCSEs, which is perhaps the most important single stage of the languages 'pipeline', confirms that access to language education and recognition is far from equitable. For many pupils, language education ends before it has really begun. Developing an awareness of how language works and a transferable 'linguistic mindset' is a postcode lottery.

Measuring average per-pupil GCSE entries indicates that language education, language choices and existing multilingualism are complex and vary considerably across the country.⁴⁰ It is clear that school leadership teams and school-level policies play a decisive role in whether languages are prioritised; multi-school trusts and local networks can also facilitate a collective strategy and shared provision when there is real impetus to do so.

Boosting language participation requires not only a targeted national strategy, but an approach that responds to specific local contexts and challenges. For instance, the National Consortium for Languages Education (NCLE)'s 14 local networks have a positive impact on supporting school leaders and teachers with promoting languages and Continuing Professional Development (CPD), and each leads a 'National Priority Project'.⁴¹ Further expansion of this contextualised approach to language education would be a worthwhile investment. Nonetheless, three overarching priorities are worth affirming here.

➤ **Teacher recruitment:** the recruitment and retention of MFL teachers continue to pose practical challenges for schools.⁴² There is a shortage of domestic MFL teachers, and yet the recruitment of international language teachers is inhibited by current immigration rules and the high costs of visa sponsorship. Easing the pathway for international teachers should be a priority.⁴³

- **Fair pathways for recognition:** equitable exam marking is a crucial incentive for schools and pupils, who need assurance that they will not underperform in languages relative to other subjects or be at a disadvantage if they sit the same exam as a native speaker. A flexible stepped qualification for languages in addition to GCSEs and A-Levels is also worth the government's continued consideration.⁴⁴ These pathways could facilitate recognition of a wider range of HHCLs, and enable pupils to gain practical linguistic and intercultural skills to complement vocational and technical as well as academic pathways.
- **An inclusive ethos:** we must also go further in challenging the narrative that languages are primarily for the highest academic achievers. Engaging with language, communication and culture is a worthwhile educational experience for all pupils, regardless of ability and whether they choose to continue with languages post-16 and beyond. Nick Hillman's evaluation of schools by their provision and recognition of languages, rather than by final grade outcomes, sets an interesting precedent for valuing participation over performance.

Higher education: a casualty of decline, or a solution?

Languages degree programmes are especially vulnerable in the higher education sector due to low projections of student demand.⁴⁵ Recently, the University of Nottingham proposed to close its Modern Languages degree provision entirely; the University of Exeter also proposed cuts. Languages in higher education are also affected by growing regional 'cold spots'; closures have most drastically affected post-1992 universities with lower-entry tariffs, further embedding unequal access.⁴⁶

Yet it is clear that declining undergraduate enrolments stem from a leaky pipeline, not a lack of interest in languages.⁴⁷ Socio-economic and geographical barriers evidently limit opportunities to gain exposure to languages and to achieve GCSEs and A-Levels. The unequal reality of languages that sets in from an early stage in schools means that we must understand lower numbers as an 'issue of access, not of demand' in the true sense.⁴⁸

Rather than making irreversible cuts to teaching and research, higher education institutions should instead adapt their offering more precisely to this changing context. For instance, universities should consider expanding the availability of *ab initio* courses to encourage applicants who missed out on the opportunity to study a language in school. They should also facilitate students' rising interest in interdisciplinary and joint-honours programmes that combine language study with other subjects. Likewise, they should protect institution-wide language provision (IWLP) that enables students across all disciplines to learn a language flexibly alongside their studies. Regional networks and interinstitutional collaborations⁴⁹ may also present a pragmatic solution for sustaining higher education language provision in areas where it is at risk.⁵⁰

Higher education institutions can play an active role in celebrating linguistic diversity, both among their own students and staff and within their local context; this is an aspect of inclusion and internationalisation that can sometimes be overlooked or viewed as a problem rather than an asset.⁵¹ They can also promote languages in the local community through civic engagement and by leading public-facing initiatives and events. For instance, the successful 'Leeds City of Languages' festival in November 2025, led by the School of Languages, Cultures and Societies at the University of Leeds, offered a range of taster language sessions, events and activities for schools; the festival will return in 2026.⁵²

Likewise, higher education institutions may contribute valuable outreach interventions that help to inspire pupils at the crucial pre-GCSE stage, highlighting in particular the creative, cultural and literary aspects of studying these subjects to a higher level.⁵³ Another approach that can

have a measurable effect on language uptake is intensive small-group mentoring of school pupils by higher education students studying language subjects.⁵⁴ For instance, the pioneering MFL Mentoring Project in Wales has had a significant impact on motivation and GCSE uptake by delivering student mentoring to pupils in 80 per cent of Welsh schools through a partnership that includes all of Wales's universities.⁵⁵

In short, we must urgently consider the positive, symbiotic roles that higher education institutions can and should have in supporting the languages pipeline and in the local revitalisation of languages.⁵⁶

Endnotes

- 1 Nick Hillman, 'New school league table for Languages', Higher Education Policy Institute, 1 July 2026 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/reports/a-new-school-league-table-for-language-provision/>. These data were taken from the Department for Education's School Performance Tables for England for 2025, available at <https://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk/download-data>. My analysis is based on the data in 'Table 3', which includes both classical and modern languages.
- 2 See further: Megan Bowler, *A Languages Crisis*, Higher Education Policy Institute, January 2020, <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/reports/a-languages-crisis/>; Megan Bowler, *The Languages Crisis: Arresting Decline*, Higher Education Policy Institute, July 2025 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/The-Languages-Crisis-Arresting-decline.pdf>
- 3 Nor is a consistent language education guaranteed before the age of 14. The national curriculum requires that foreign languages are taught at Key Stage 2 and 3. However, provision and teaching expertise at primary school is often patchy, and the transition from primary to secondary poses challenges for continuity. Further, free schools and academies are not bound by the national curriculum, though they are expected to have a broad curriculum that includes languages and the humanities.
- 4 Computing is the only other subject to make the bottom six. See Ofqual, *Provisional entries for GCSE, AS and A level: summer 2026 exam series*, 9 June 2026 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/provisional-entries-for-gcse-as-and-a-level-summer-2026-exam-series/provisional-entries-for-gcse-as-and-a-level-summer-2026-exam-series>
- 5 In other European countries, it is mandatory for pupils to learn one or often two foreign languages until the age of 16 or 18. Eurostat data from 2024 indicated that virtually all pupils in the EU study one language in upper secondary education, and 49 per cent learn two or more. Eurostat, 'Foreign language learning statistics', April 2026 https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Foreign_language_learning_statistics#Upper_secondary_education
- 6 Languages account for fewer than three per cent of A-Level entries. Megan Bowler, *The Languages Crisis: Arresting Decline*, Higher Education Policy Institute, July 2025, p.21 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/The-Languages-Crisis-Arresting-decline.pdf>
- 7 Half of state secondary schools report being unable to run A-Level classes unless a minimum cohort size is met, meaning that there is no guaranteed opportunity for continuation after GCSE. Ian Collen, Natalie Finlayson and Helen McKelvey, *Language Trends England, 2026*, British Council, p.48 https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/language_trends_england_report_2026.pdf
- 8 The West Midlands (47 per cent), followed by Yorkshire and the Humber and the North East, have the highest proportion of schools where no pupils study French, Spanish or German at A-Level. As a result of these cold spots, some pupils wanting to take a language A-Level have to travel for more than an hour to study at another school. Jessica Sharkey and Louise Eccles, 'Why are pupils abandoning languages in the hundreds of thousands? Many sixth-forms no longer offer any core modern languages', *The Times*, 21 September 2025 <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/education/article/pupils-abandoning-languages-schools-rkqdv5z7c>
- 9 Currently, the Cambridge International IGCSE is counted for Spanish and German only; other IGCSE qualifications are not counted.
- 10 HHCLs and 'native speakers' are complex terms rather than homogenous categories, and encompass a wide spectrum of language acquisition experiences. HHCL learners include those who have a language other than English as a first language, those who learn through immersion at home, and those who learn their heritage language through tuition at a community school or independently.
- 11 "Disparities in GCSE results are often framed through the lens of a North-South divide, but that narrative can obscure the challenges facing children in coastal and rural parts of England." Branwen Jeffreys, 'The 'education gap' hiding behind picture-perfect Cornwall and Devon', *BBC News*, 6 August 2026 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c39e7n8rvd2o>
- 12 The heat maps used in this policy note present the mean number of per-pupil entries at the end of Key Stage 4 for pupils across all schools (both independent and state schools) within each Local Education Authority (LEA), according to 2025 school performance data.
- 13 FFT Education Datalab, 'GCSE and Level 1/2 results 2026: The main trends in grades and entries', 20 August 2026 <https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2026/08/gcse-and-level-1-2-results-2026-the-main-trends-in-grades-and-entries>
- 14 This was the subject of a House of Lords debate on the 8 January 2026: 'Schools and Universities: Language Learning' <https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2026-01-08/debates/7C137330-6CB0-46E0-A482-A79D5409E5EC/SchoolsAndUniversitiesLanguageLearning>
- 15 Only 17 per cent of independent schools responding to the Languages Trends Survey 2026 had no pupils studying French, Spanish or German A-Level. Ian Collen, Natalie Finlayson and Helen McKelvey, 'Language Trends England, 2026', British Council, p.48 https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/language_trends_england_report_2026.pdf
- 16 Ursula Lanvers, 'Elitism in language learning in the UK', in Damian J Rivers and Karin Zotzmann (eds), *Isms in Language Education: Oppression, Intersectionality and Emancipation*, 2017, pp.58-59 <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501503085>
- 17 Independent Schools Council, 'Sector Info' <https://www.isc.co.uk/sector-info/>
- 18 Karen Forbes, 'Promoting modern languages beyond the compulsory stage: exploring the relationship between school-level curriculum policy, GCSE uptake and attainment in England', *The Language Learning Journal*, 2026 <https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2025.2551613>
- 19 Abigail Parrish and Ursula Lanvers, 'Student motivation, school policy choices and modern language study in England', *The Language Learning Journal*, 2019 <https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2018.1508305>
- 20 Zhu Hua, Elin Arfon and Ann-Marie Hunter, 'Opportunity for all? Which pupils are studying languages in England and why?', UCL Institute of Education Blog, 7 November 2024 <https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/2024/11/07/opportunity-for-all-which-pupils-are-studying-languages-in-england-and-why/>
- 21 In 2024/25, 88.4 per cent of pupils missing just one EBacc component lacked the language GCSE. Department for Education, 'Academic year 2024/25 Key stage 4 performance', 4 August 2026 <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-performance/2024-25#section-e-bacc-entry-and-subjects-entered>
- 22 A Teacher Tapp survey found that 29 per cent of respondents reported their schools had cut down on language provision since November's announcement; Esmé Kenney, 'EBacc withdrawal 'squeezes languages out of the picture'', *Schools Week*, 23 April 2026 <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/ebacc-withdrawal-squeezes-languages-out-of-the-picture/> The impact of the EBacc was also a recurrent theme of responses to the Language Trends England 2026 survey: Ian Collen, Natalie Finlayson and Helen McKelvey, 'Language Trends England, 2026', British Council, pp.30-31, pp.55-56 https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/language_trends_england_report_2026.pdf

- 23 FSM quintiles were calculated by ranking all state schools by the proportion of pupils who were eligible for means-tested Free School Meals within the past six years (FSM6), and grouped according to the 20th, 40th, 60th and 80th percentiles. Quintile 1 indicates the lowest level of deprivation and Quintile 5 the highest. Data sourced from <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics/2024-25#section-free-school-meals-eligibility>
- 24 Ofqual, 'Provisional entries for GCSE, AS and A-Level: summer 2026 exam series', 9 June 2026 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/provisional-entries-for-gcse-as-and-a-level-summer-2026-exam-series/provisional-entries-for-gcse-as-and-a-level-summer-2026-exam-series>
- 25 See further <https://www.hackneyservicesforschools.co.uk/extranet/spanish>
- 26 City Lit, 'The most in demand languages for professionals in the UK (2026)', 27 March 2026 <https://www.citylit.ac.uk/blog/top-in-demand-languages>.
- 27 Megan Bowler, *The Languages Crisis: Arresting Decline*, Higher Education Policy Institute, 31 July 2025, pp.19-21 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/The-Languages-Crisis-Arresting-decline.pdf>
- 28 Data sourced from Joint Council for Qualifications exam results for 2025: https://www.jcq.org.uk/exam-results-data/page/2/?exam_filter_result_year=2025&exam_filter_document_type&exam_filter_qualification=gcse#038;exam_filter_document_type&exam_filter_qualification=gcse
- 29 See further: Goethe Institute, 'National German A-level Class (NGAC)', https://www.goethe.de/ins/gb/en/spr/drm/nga.html#accordion_toggle_27240634_2
- 30 This parity of esteem for ancient languages was formally embedded in The British Academy's national strategy, and in the UCFL's change of name from the University Council for Modern Languages to the University Council For Languages in 2023. The British Academy, *Towards a national languages strategy: education and skills*, July 2020 <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/towards-national-languages-strategy-education-and-skills/>
- 31 For instance, the OxLat scheme run by the University of Oxford's Faculty of Classics offers *ab initio* Latin GCSE tuition to Oxfordshire pupils from state schools without Latin provision.
- 32 The qualification is supported by the Council of University Classics Departments (CUCD), and is recognised by UCAS. See <https://intermediategreekcert.com>
- 33 Michael Natzler, *Understanding China: The study of China and Mandarin in UK schools and universities*, HEPI Report 148, March 2022 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Understanding-China-The-study-of-China-and-Mandarin-in-UK-schools-and-universities.pdf>
- 34 Kyle Tormey, 'Could a broader mix of languages halt the decline of MFL?', *TES*, 22 June 2026 <https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/secondary/can-other-modern-languages-stop-decline-mfl>
- 35 Sascha Stollhans, 'A-level results: key takeaways for language learning', *The Conversation*, 13 August 2026 <https://theconversation.com/a-level-results-key-takeaways-for-language-learning-287913>
- 36 Data sourced from <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics/2024-25#section-first-language>.
- 37 Kate Lightfoot, Maksi Kozińska, and Michelle Sheehan, 'Community languages in the United Kingdom: the great potential of multilingualism', *Languages, Society and Policy*, 26 November 2024 <https://www.lspjournal.com/post/community-languages-in-the-united-kingdom-the-great-potential-of-multilingualism>. Data sourced from <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics/2024-25#section-first-language>
- 38 Emma Humphries, 'Home, heritage and community languages in admissions processes', *Advance HE*, 6 March 2026. <https://advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/home-heritage-and-community-languages-admissions-processes/>
- 39 Census 2021, 'Language, England and Wales', <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/language/bulletins/languageenglandandwales/census2021>. Helen Drew, Victoria Cook, 'The campaign for Romanian to become a GCSE option', *BBC News*, 1 March 2026 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c0e5z004z7eo>
- 40 Zhu Hua, Elin Arfon and Ann-Marie Hunter, 'Complexity in secondary languages: how the local context shapes languages education in England', *The Language Learning Journal*, 2026 <https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2025.2557456>
- 41 National Consortium for Languages Education, 'Language Networks' <https://ncle.ucl.ac.uk/language-networks/>. The NCLE originally set up a larger 'language hubs' scheme in 2023, which was reshaped after the Department for Education reduced funding in September 2025.
- 42 Ann-Marie Hunter and Zhu Hua, 'Language Teacher Recruitment and Retention in England's Schools: Practitioner perspectives', *Languages, Society and Policy*, 10 August 2026 <https://www.lspjournal.com/post/language-teacher-recruitment-and-retention-in-england-s-schools-practitioner-perspectives>
- 43 Juliette Claro, 'Why England cannot afford to lose its international Modern Languages Teachers', HEPI blog, 9 August 2026 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2026/08/09/weekend-reading-why-england-cannot-afford-to-lose-its-international-modern-languages-teachers/>
- 44 'Our ambition is for more pupils to develop strong language skills. We want to recognise pupils' achievements earlier than GCSE and motivate them to continue studying and developing their language abilities. We will explore the feasibility of developing a new qualification which enables all pupils to have their achievements acknowledged when they are ready rather than at fixed points.' UK Government, *Response to the Curriculum and Assessment Review*, November 2025, p.33 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/690b2a4a14b040dfe82922ea/Government_response_to_the_Curriculum_and_Assessment_Review.pdf
- 45 Megan Bowler, *The Languages Crisis: Arresting Decline*, Higher Education Policy Institute, 31 July 2025, pp.24-27 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/The-Languages-Crisis-Arresting-decline.pdf>
- 46 British Academy, 'Cold spots: Mapping inequality in SHAPE provision in UK higher education', September 2025 https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/5877/Cold_spots_-_Mapping_inequality_in_SHAPE_provision_in_UK_higher_education.pdf
- 47 Anna Bawden, 'Cutting language courses puts social mobility at risk, say UK experts', *Guardian*, 5 July 2026 <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2026/jul/05/cutting-university-language-courses-puts-social-mobility-at-risk-say-experts>
- 48 Ana de Medeiros, Marcela Cazzoli, 'Modern languages has a future – and it's all about access', *Wonkhe*, 27 May 2026 <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/modern-languages-has-a-future-and-its-all-about-access/>
- 49 The House of Commons Education Committee have rightly called on the Government to mitigate barriers to productive collaboration, such as VAT and competition law, to support universities at risk of insolvency. House of Commons Education Committee, *Higher Education and Funding: Threat of Insolvency and International Students*, 12 May 2026, pp.66-72 <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/52983/documents/295982/default/>
- 50 The Intercollegiate MFL Master's programme across University of London institutions also sets a precedent for shared provision. Universities UK, 'Transformation and Efficiency Taskforce: Towards a new era of collaboration', July 2025, p.33 https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/field/downloads/2025-07/UUK-Transformation-and-Efficiency-Towards-a-new-era-of-collaboration-2025_1.pdf
- 51 Yolanda Cerda and Bee Bond, 'The sector needs a language policy reset', *Wonkhe*, 13 August 2026 <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/the-sector-needs-a-language-policy-reset/>
- 52 <https://leedscityoflanguages.leeds.ac.uk/>; City of Languages initiatives have also been launched in other cities.
- 53 Charlotte Ryland, 'Bucking the trend: Universities collaborating to increase languages uptake in schools', in Duolingo, *Keep the Streak*, April 2026 <https://blog.englishtest.duolingo.com/language-learning-uk-policy-essays-charlotte-ryland/>. The Queen's College Translation Exchange has now reached over 25,000 school pupils, and last year's Anthea Bell prize for young translators received over 22,000 participants.
- 54 The British Academy, 'What Works: Languages Mentoring and Ambassador Programmes', July 2022 https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/4219/British_Academy_Briefing_Languages_Mentoring_July_2022_vF_W7JAc23.pdf
- 55 See further <https://mflmentoring.co.uk/evaluations/>
- 56 Institute of Translation and Interpreting, Chartered Institute of Linguists, Association of Translation Companies, 'The strategic case for languages in UK higher education', 14 January 2026 <https://www.iti.org.uk/resource/making-the-case.html>; Jo Fox and Fiona Devine, 'The joy and vitality of languages', HEPI Blog, 13 August 2026 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2026/08/13/the-joy-and-vitality-of-languages/>