

Beating the odds: What do we know about schools which exceed expectations for MFL entry and attainment?

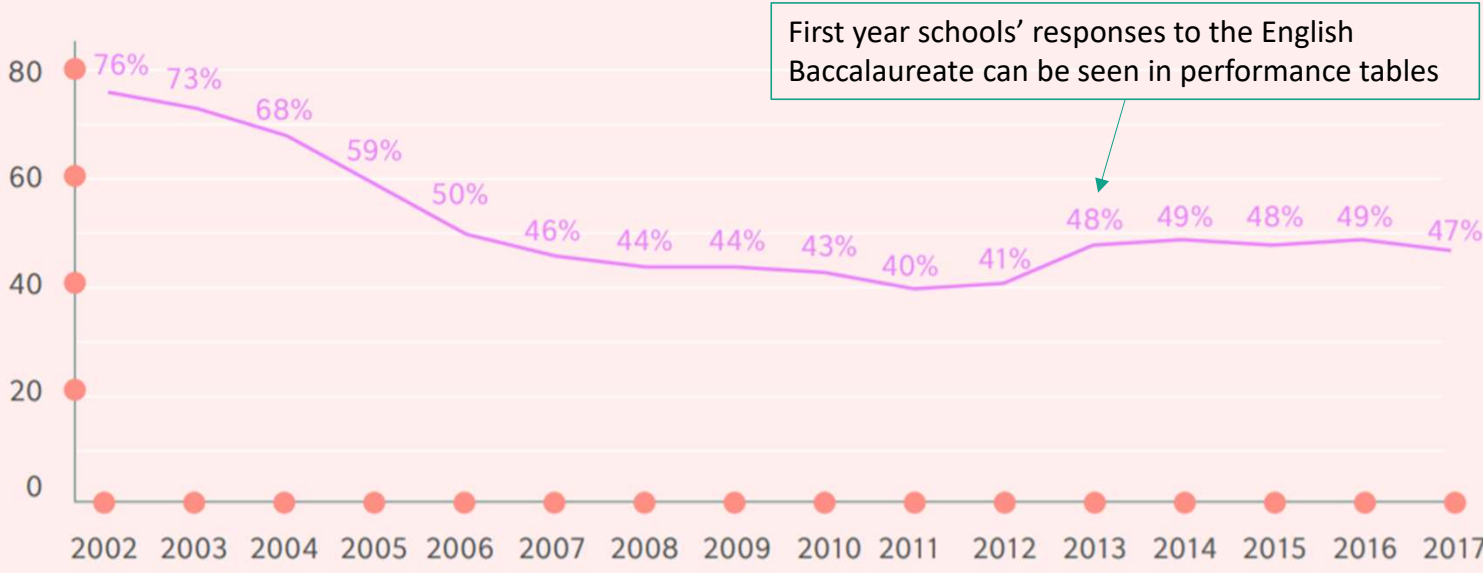
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The logo for the Education Policy Institute, featuring a white circle partially overlapping a green circle.

GCSE language entries have been falling since no longer compulsory, with a small up-swerve when the EBacc was introduced

Figure 1: Proportion of pupils sitting a modern language at GCSE at the end of Key Stage 4, 2002-2017

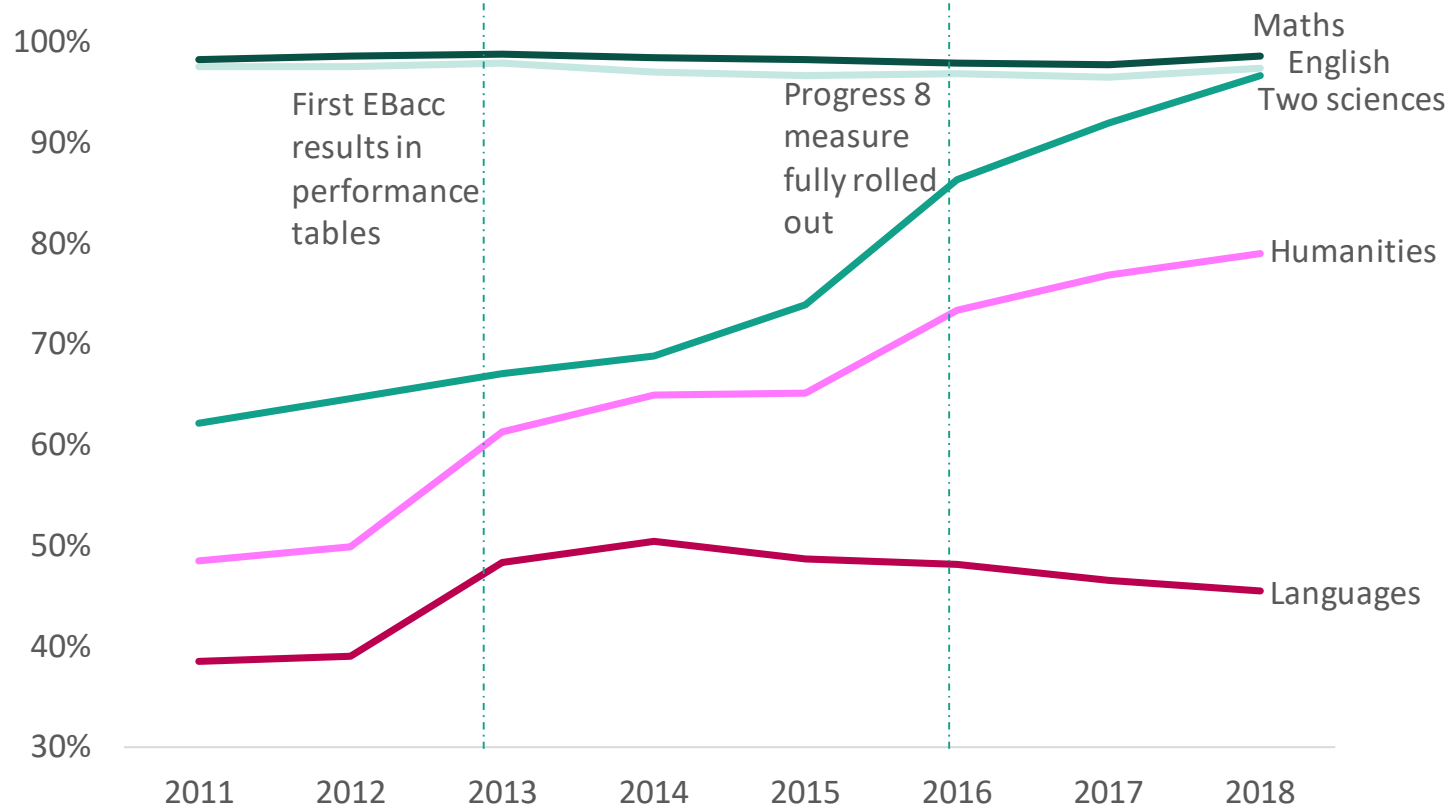


Quick update:
Entries to any language (modern/ancient) as a percentage of maths entries

Year	%
2017	40.1%
2018	41.8%
2019	42.2%
2020	42.0%
2021	40.8%

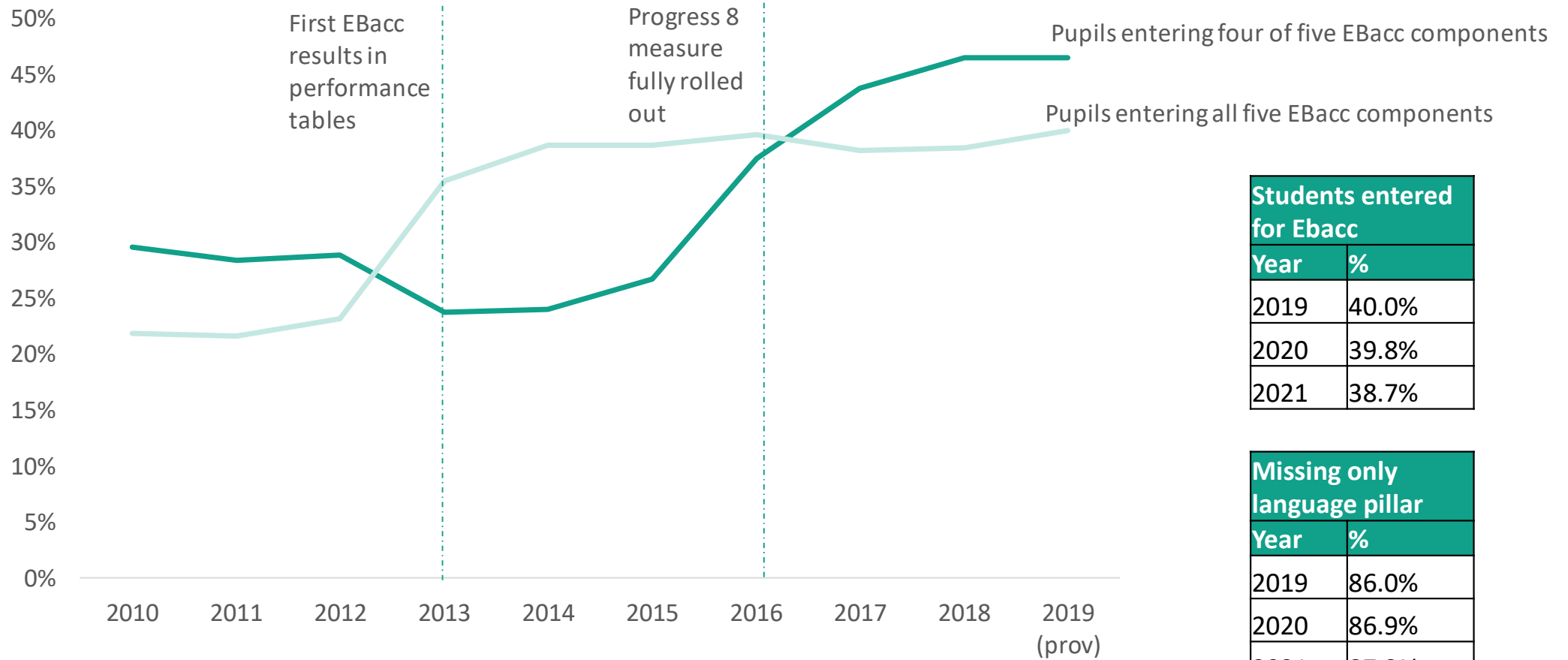
Source: Language Trends 2018, British Council; Provisional entries for GCSE, AS and A level: summer 2021 exam series, Ofqual

Languages have not seen the same increase as other EBacc subjects



Source: National Pupil Database 2010/11-2017/18, DfE, mainstream state-funded schools

Progress 8 is driving subject trends, not EBacc

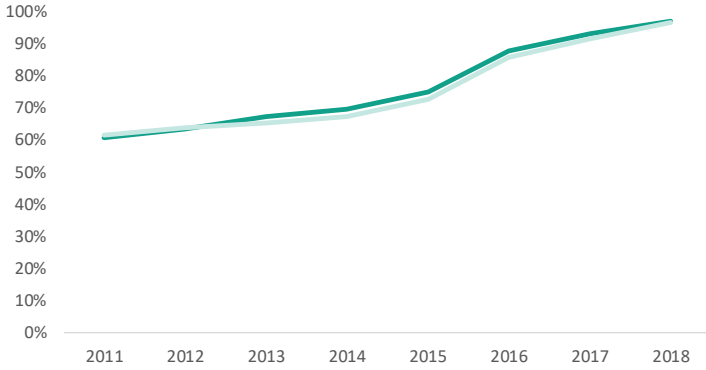


Source: Academic Year 2020/21 Key stage 4 performance, DfE

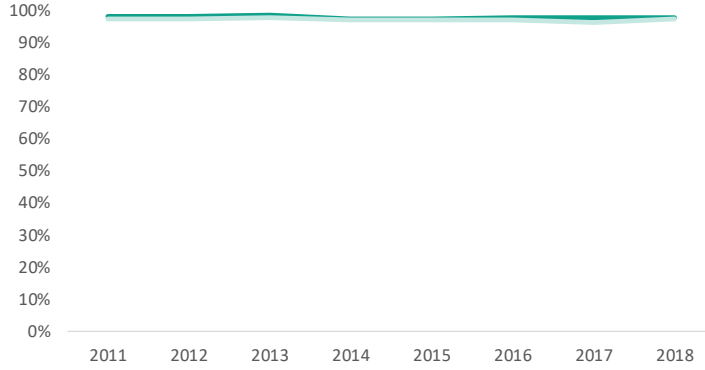
The language component is the only EBacc pillar with a clear gender divide



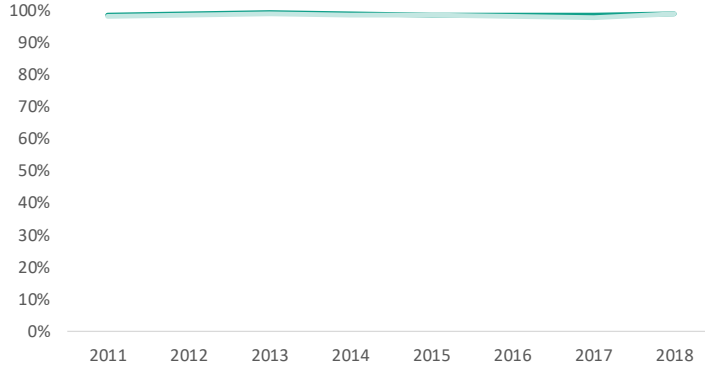
Two sciences



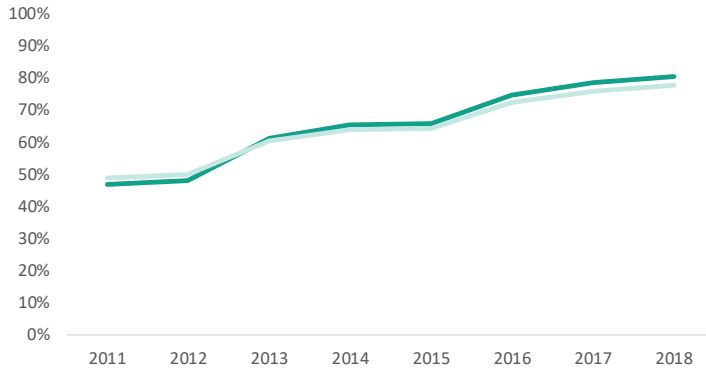
English



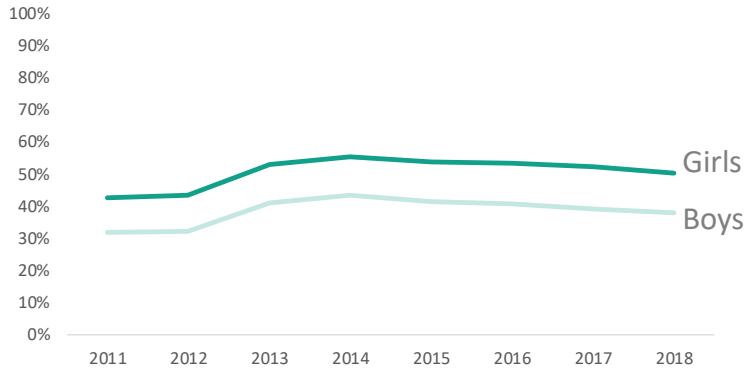
Maths



Humanities



Languages



Source: National Pupil Database 2010/11-2017/18, DfE, mainstream state-funded schools

The British Council commissioned EPI research to understand how schools can encourage boys to study MFL at GCSE

We aimed to:

- Identify schools doing well in both entry and attainment. ✓
- Avoid pulling out the schools that are front-loaded for success, e.g. selective grammars or schools in affluent areas. ✗
- Focus on schools that may not have strong outcomes in absolute terms, but are **doing better than might be expected, given their context.** ✓
- Not explicitly look for schools with narrow gender gaps. Instead we focused on schools where boys were doing better than might be expected. ~

Research Phase 1: Identifying schools in England that are 'beating the odds'

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Schools had to be

- predicted to achieve below the national average, and achieve
- ten percentage points** higher than predicted for **all boys** and for **disadvantaged boys.**



Single sex schools were excluded.



What level of MFL attainment would we expect in a school, looking only at the characteristics of its pupils?



We use the National Pupil Database to model the average effect of various pupil characteristics (gender, disadvantage, SEN, EAL, prior attainment...) on a young person's propensity to achieve grade 4 or above in a language GCSE.

What we found: Pupil level predictors

We find that when predicting whether a pupil enters one or more MFL GCSEs **and** achieves at least a grade 4:

- **Gender** is a more important determinant than whether they are disadvantaged
- The most important determinant is **KS2 attainment**
- The second is the **IDACI score** of the pupil's postcodes

Predictor	Odds Ratios
Pupil is male	0.46
Pupil is disadvantaged	0.57
Pupil is classified as having special educational needs	0.42
IDACI score, from pupil's postcode (low score = low percentage of families with income deprivation) ²⁴	0.22
Pupil is in next higher prior attainment band (Three bands, ordered low, middle and high)	4.56
Pupil speaks English as an additional language	3.60
Pupil's postcode is in London	1.46
Pupil attends school in London	1.36

Source: National Pupil Database 2013/14-2017/18, DfE, mainstream state-funded schools. Number of pupils > 2,000,000

What we found: Schools that beat the odds

What characteristics do schools that beat the odds share?

- On average schools beating the odds have **more disadvantaged pupils, more EAL pupils** and **higher prior attainment**, but not always.
- Vast majority are in cities, towns or major conurbations, but not always
- The North West does particularly well
- School governance does not seem to be important, but if MAT being mixed-phase is helpful
- Odds-beating schools typically have **smaller gender gaps for entry** but **wider gender gaps for attainment** in MFL.

The number of schools beating the odds has dropped substantially in recent years

Year	No. schools beating odds	Total schools
13/14	275	2,284
14/15	263	2,301
15/16	267	2,278
16/17	118	2,249
17/18	75	2,253

Follow-up survey: What do odds-beating schools do?

43 'odds beating' schools identified

37 schools that beat the odds for boys' language outcomes in 2017/18 **and** for at least two years since 2013/14.
6 schools which beat the odds in 2017/18 **and** in MATs/LAs where at least half of schools beat the odds at least once during the 5-year window

Questionnaire

September – November 2019, 32 responses received

Case studies

Selected schools representing different circumstances were contacted for follow-up

Key limitation

Schools that were doing well were asked what they thought contributed to their success.

-> Did not look for systematic differences between odds-beating and 'normal' schools

-> Could not test causality

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Questions about 7 factors:

Choice of languages

Language promotion

Pupil profiles

Senior management policies

Staff gender balance

Structure of curriculum

Teaching approaches.

Follow-up survey – what do odds-beating schools do?

Findings

Not seen to be important:

Choice of languages, language promotion, pupil profile and staff gender balance

Seen as important:

Senior management policies, structure of curriculum and teaching approaches

Qualitative research – what do odds beating schools do?

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Curriculum and SMT

Two thirds of schools operate some form of compulsion. Others strongly advise languages to at least some pupils. Only six operate free choice for all (of which 3 recently had compulsion)

Other helpful policies:

Offering alternative accreditation in addition to GCSE

Allowing all abilities to enter MFL GCSEs

Allowing smaller classes to run

A pro-languages ethos

Qualitative research – schools do odds beating schools do?

Findings

Not seen to be important:

Choice of languages, language promotion, pupil profile and staff gender balance

Seen as important:

Senior management policies, structure of curriculum and teaching approaches

Teaching approaches

- Speaking and interaction over writing and decontextualised vocabulary and rule-learning.
- Use of strong frameworks and scaffolding
- Use of rewards and incentives.
- Use of humour and competitive activities.
- Providing clarity and realism in the student's language learning journey.
- Meticulous preparation for exams.
- Use of film – well-selected films, with work to enable contextualisation and discussion.

Conclusions

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Table 5: Time for languages in Years 3 and 6

	Less than 30 minutes	30 – 45 minutes	More than 45 minutes but less than 1 hour	Between 1 and 2 hours	No language teaching
Year 3	8%	52%	29%	11%	-
Year 6	5%	45%	34%	15%	1%

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The 'stick' of EBacc doesn't seem very strong (SSAT - Ofsted and the EBacc)

What might help?

- DfE 'Higher education outcomes for EBacc subject entry', 2019
- Sutton Trust 'Changing the subject', 2016
 - 300 schools that moved to an EBacc curriculum had better attainment in English and maths and pupil premium pupils benefitted the most.
- 2022 EPI Annual Report – disadvantage gaps by subject
- *Possible future research - difference between 4 and 5 EBacc pillars?*

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Thank you for your time