

A-level results day 2019: more girls than boys study science for the first time

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More girls than boys took A levels in science for the first time this year as the drive to improve female participation in Stem subjects delivered results.

Young women made up 50.3 per cent of entries in the three main sciences. In biology, they accounted for 63 per cent of entries and in chemistry it was 54 per cent. Physics still has a considerable gender divide, however, with girls making up only 23 per cent of entries.

The surge in girls' participation is the result of years of campaigning on Stem subjects — science, technology and maths — by the government, business and [schools](#) to address [skills shortages](#) and get women into higher-paid jobs.

New-look A levels, rolled out over the past three years, were also tweaked with girls in mind. More practicals were introduced during the two-year course in an attempt to make the topics more “relevant”.

The BBC and other broadcasters have made a concerted effort to ensure that science coverage includes women, such as Dame Sally Davies, the chief medical officer for England, the planetary scientist Monica Grady and Maggie Aderin-Pocock, the space scientist.

Geoff Barton, general secretary of the ASCL head teachers union, said that he hoped the change was driven by girls knowing they could do what they wanted. “I think it is more a case of girls no longer feeling funnelled into certain subjects and choosing what is right for them regardless of history or stereotypes,” he said. “Schools have worked really hard trying to lure female science teachers where possible and bring back former female science students to talk about their studies.”

Computing is the only Stem subject where boys continue to dominate, with 13 per cent of the 11,124 A level entries coming from girls.

Maths remains the most popular subject, but entries fell by six per cent. Experts said that some were put off by the much tougher maths GCSE, which is seen as better preparation for the rigours of A level.

English literature suffered a bigger fall of 7.8 per cent to 40,824 entries. It is now the seventh most popular subject, having been number one in 2013. English language fell most dramatically, down by 21.8 per cent with only 14,114 exam entries. More pupils now take art, psychology and history than English.

Spanish has replaced French as the most popular language A level. The longer term decline in modern languages appears to have levelled off overall. Some languages, such as Polish and Portuguese, fell.

The row over the difficulty of the reformed maths A level rumbled on with Thursday's results. Edexcel, the biggest board for the subject, cut the pass mark at E grade to 14 per cent to ensure enough pupils scraped through, such was the complexity of the exam it set.

Head teachers said that the questions appeared designed to “trip up” pupils rather than allow them to show off their skill and hard work. An official from the board said that it now understood teachers' concerns.

Ofqual, the exams regulator, has launched an inquiry into whether the exam boards should lower the pass mark and grade boundaries for the 2018 exam. Fewer than 2,000 took the exam, mainly very able pupils, and Ofqual believes that in light of this year's boundaries, those for last year were perhaps too high.