

GCSE Religious Studies 2026

ENGLAND

Participation, attainment and subject trends



A briefing to accompany the NATRE GCSE RS 2026 infographic

August 2026

Cover image: NATRE secondary student image © NATRE 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What the 2026 GCSE RS results show in England

218,602

full-course entries

+0.5%

on 2025

32.3%

grade 7+

73.7%

grade 4+

Participation is broadly stable, not collapsing. Entries rose 0.5% in 2026 to 218,602, broadly in line with the 0.7% growth in GCSE entries overall. Entries remain about 4% below 2019.

RS has a strong attainment profile. 32.3% of entries achieved grade 7 or above and 73.7% grade 4 or above. Both are above the England all-subject figures, although national subject comparisons are not measures of subject difficulty.

The main inequality is attainment rather than participation. Girls are 53.6% of entries but have an 11.7 percentage-point advantage at grade 7+ and a 10.4-point advantage at grade 4+. The gap has narrowed since 2019, but remains much wider than the overall GCSE gender gap.

Use a clean trend series. Use 2019, 2023, 2024, 2025 and 2026 for ordinary trend work. Pandemic-era 2020-22 results reflect exceptional grading arrangements and should not be plotted as if they were directly comparable examination years.

Scope and method

This briefing analyses full-course GCSE Religious Studies in England using JCQ results-day data. It uses the JCQ dashboard as the navigation layer and the underlying results tables for numerical analysis. FFT is used to place RS in the wider 2026 subject and gender picture; Ofqual Analytics is used for methodological and benchmarking context.

The infographic provides the headline summary; this longer briefing sets out the underlying patterns, caveats and questions for subject leaders and policy audiences.

Source: JCQ GCSE results dashboard and 2026 Table 2; JCQ historical results files; FFT Education Datalab; Ofqual Analytics.

Full-course participation is broadly stable

218,602

entries in 2026

+0.5%

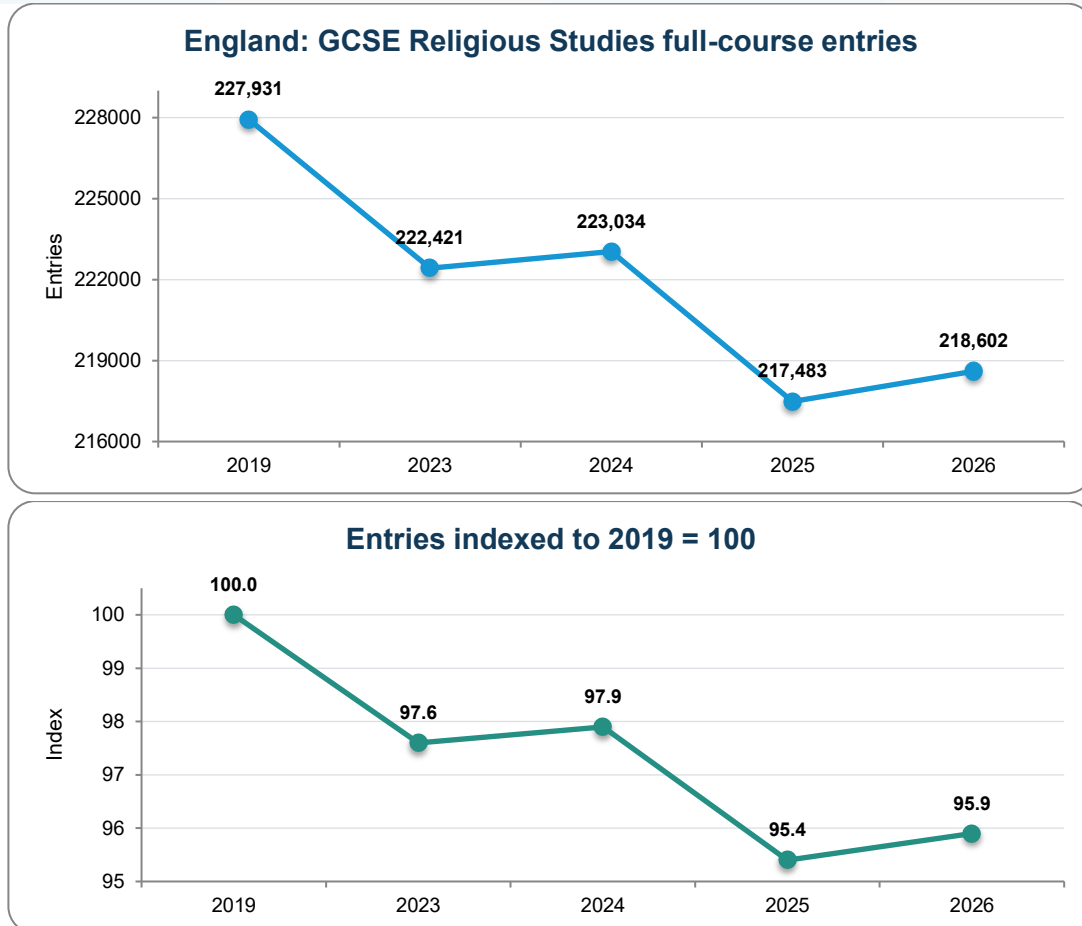
year on year

-4.1%

since 2019

7th

most widely taken GCSE



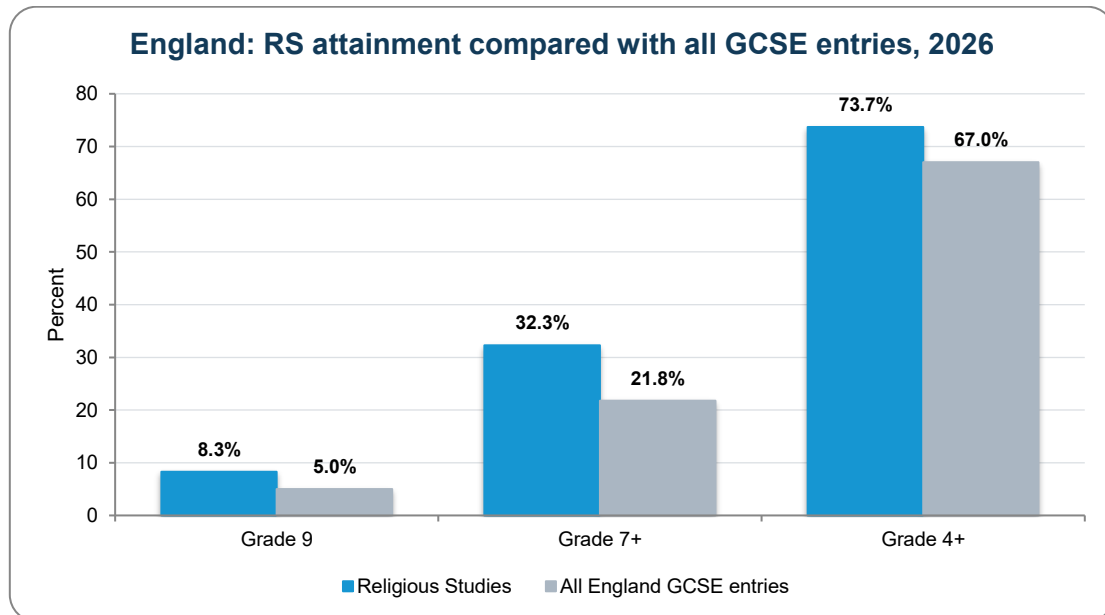
Source: JCQ, GCSE results by main grades, subjects, age and gender, England, 2026 (Table 2), 20 August 2026; JCQ historical full-course results files for 2019, 2023 and 2024; 2025 comparator from JCQ 2025 results tables.

The final full-course picture is more positive than the provisional entry data suggested. Ofqual's provisional statistics combined full and short course RS and showed a small decline; FFT explicitly notes that the final full-course data instead show an increase broadly in line with the 0.7% rise in GCSE entries overall.

For subject leaders, this means the national 2026 story is not one of a sudden collapse in GCSE RS demand. The longer trend is nevertheless softer than the growth in the age-16 population, and access remains uneven between schools.

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RS outcomes are strong across both key thresholds



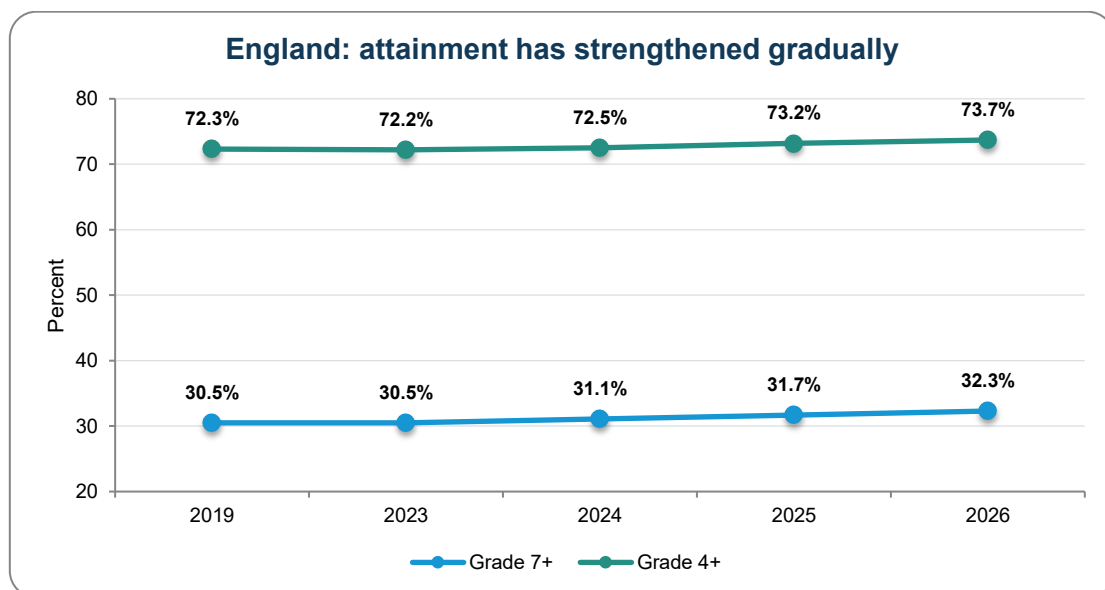
Source: JCQ, GCSE results by main grades, subjects, age and gender, England, 2026 (Table 2). The all-England comparison uses the main-grade population; FFT separately reports 23.1% at grade 7+ and 70.7% at grade 4+ for 16-year-old entries.

In the all-age JCQ Table 2 population, RS has 8.3% at grade 9, 32.3% at grade 7+ and 73.7% at grade 4+. These compare with roughly 5.0%, 21.8% and 67.0% across all England GCSE entries in the same main-grade dataset.

The comparison should not be read as proof that RS is “easier”: optional subjects contain different pupil populations and school entry policies. What it does show is that RS is not a low-attaining subject nationally and that departments should benchmark both high grades and the standard-pass threshold.

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Attainment has improved gradually since 2019



Source: JCQ historical GCSE full-course results and 2026 Table 2. 2019 is used as the clean pre-pandemic benchmark; 2020-22 are omitted from the plotted trend because assessment and grading arrangements were exceptional.

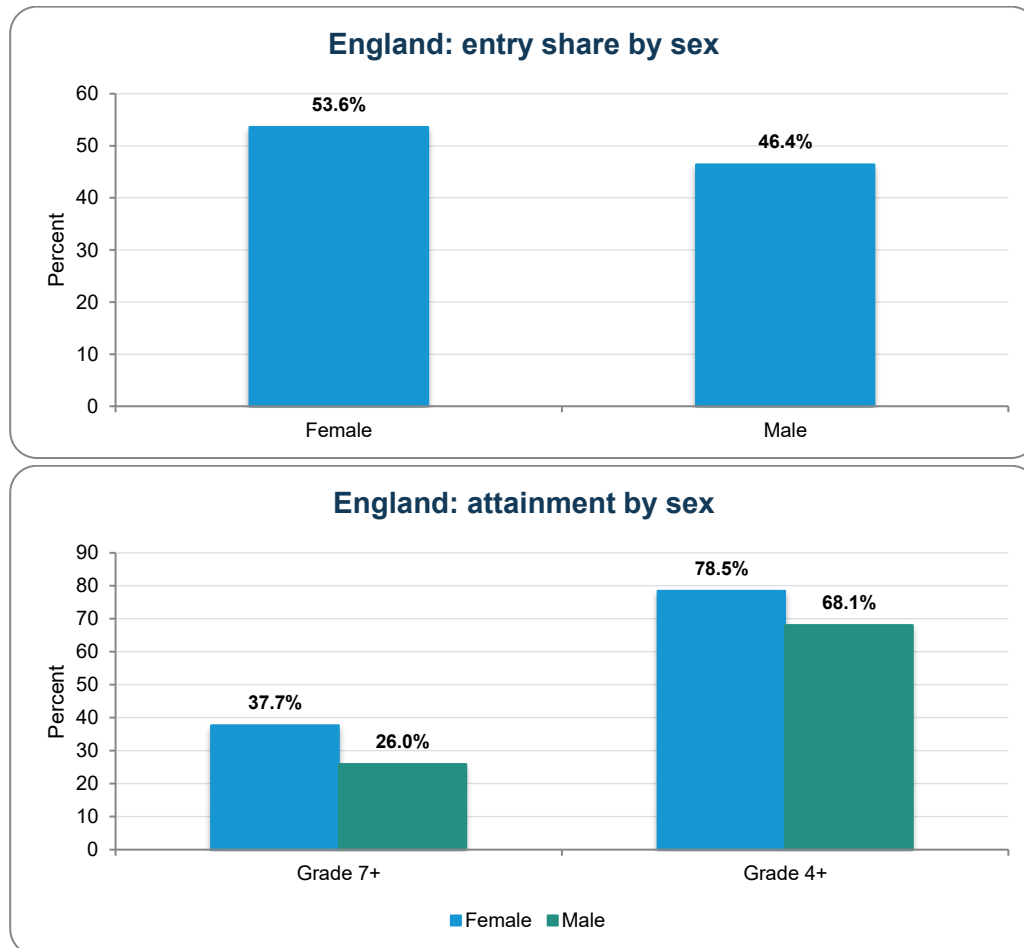
The grade 7+ rate is 1.8 percentage points higher than 2019, while grade 4+ is 1.4 points higher. The movement since 2023 is steady rather than dramatic: 30.5% → 31.1% → 31.7% → 32.3% at grade 7+ and 72.2% → 72.5% → 73.2% → 73.7% at grade 4+.

FFT's wider England analysis similarly describes 2026 GCSE grading as extremely stable overall: grade 7+ rose only 0.1 point and grade 4+ by 0.2 points. RS's 2026 change is therefore best interpreted as continuation of a modest upward trend, not a step-change in standards.

Source: FFT Education Datalab, "GCSE and Level 1/2 results 2026: The main trends in grades and entries", 20 August 2026.

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The significant issue is the attainment gap by gender

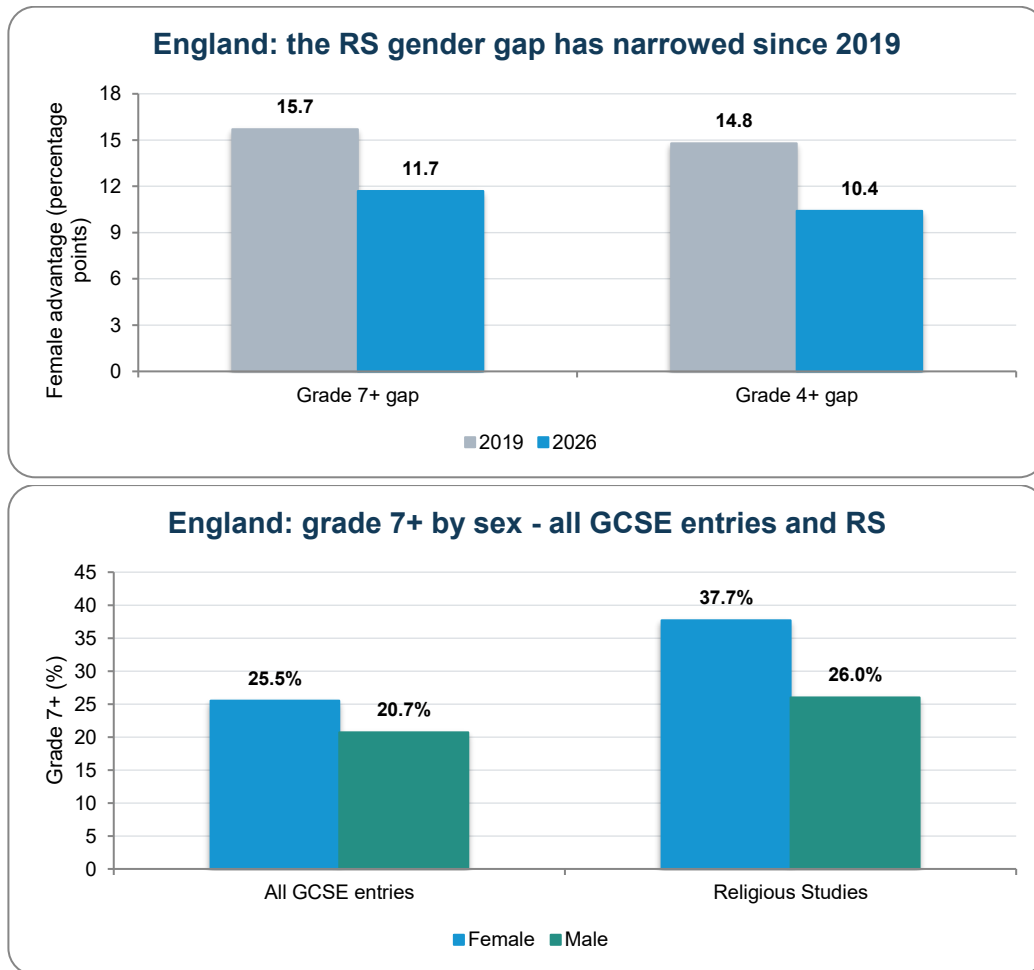


Source: JCQ, GCSE results by main grades, subjects, age and gender, England, 2026 (Table 2), Religious Studies, all ages.

Participation is only moderately female-skewed: 117,246 female entries and 101,356 male entries, a 53.6:46.4 split. Attainment is much more uneven. Girls lead boys by 11.7 percentage points at grade 7+ and 10.4 points at grade 4+.

This is a materially larger gap than the GCSE system overall. FFT reports 25.5% of female entries and 20.7% of male entries achieving grade 7+ across all subjects in 2026, a 4.8-point gap.

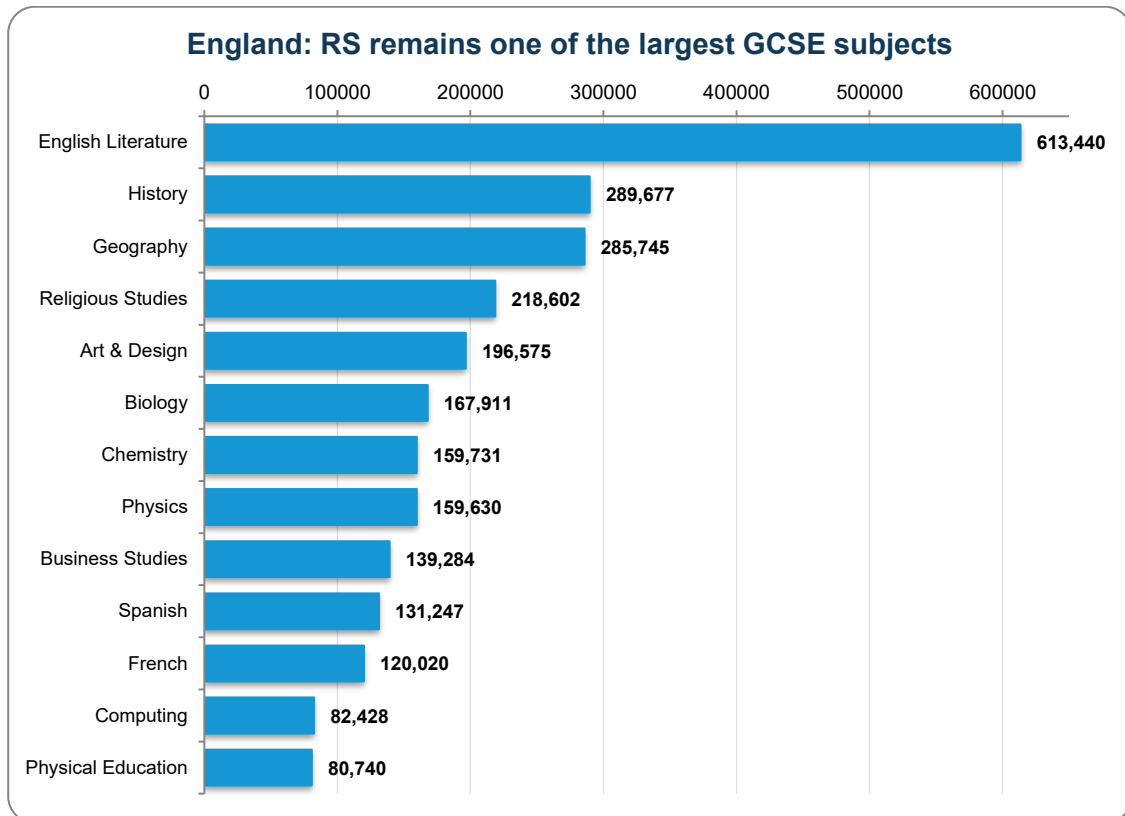
The RS gender gap has narrowed, but remains large



Source: JCQ Religious Studies grade distributions by gender, 2019 and 2026; FFT Education Datalab 2026 all-subject gender comparison.

At grade 7+, the female advantage has narrowed from 15.7 points in 2019 to 11.7 in 2026. At grade 4+, it has narrowed from 14.8 to 10.4 points. This aligns with FFT's finding that the overall GCSE gender gap has fallen for five consecutive years, largely because boys' outcomes have improved faster since 2023.

RS is a major GCSE subject, not a niche option

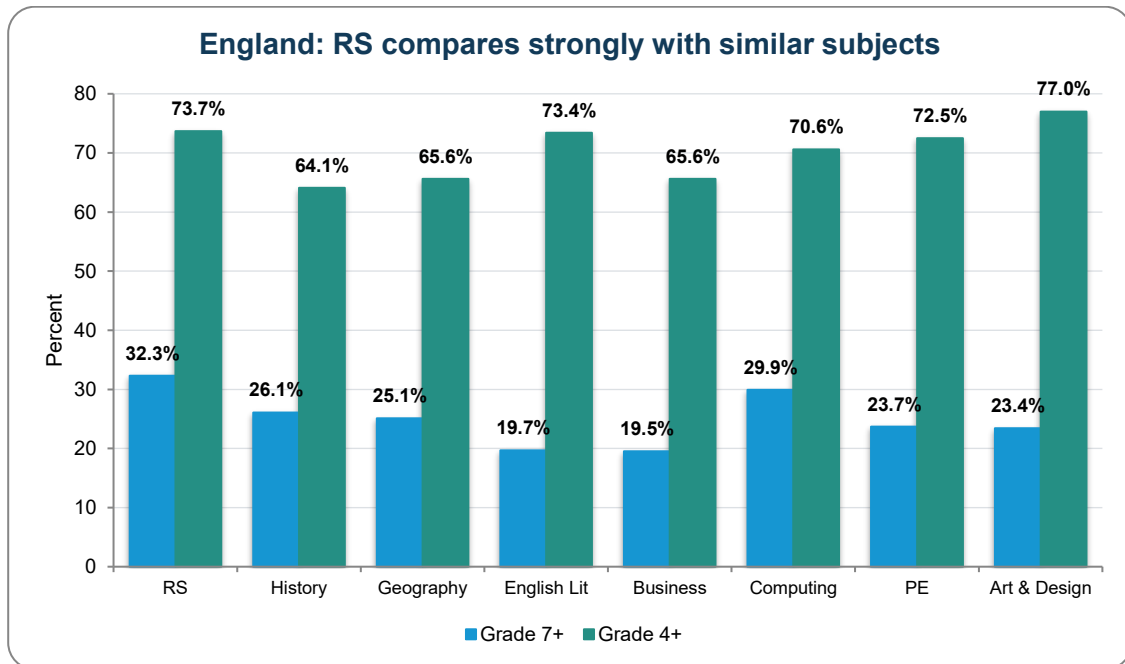


Source: JCQ, GCSE results by main grades, subjects, age and gender, England, 2026 (Table 2). NATRE/REC analysis of JCQ data places RS 7th among the 58 GCSE subjects in England.

RS has more entries than Art and Design, each separate science, Business Studies, Spanish, French, Computing and Physical Education in the main-grade table. The very largest subjects are shaped by core curriculum requirements, but among optional subjects RS remains exceptionally large.

FFT's entry analysis shows substantial movement elsewhere in the market: Statistics, Business and Media/Film grew fastest, while Other MFL, Computing and French fell most. RS full course rose broadly in line with the overall GCSE total. This is useful context when departments interpret option-block changes locally.

RS compares strongly with similar subjects



Source: JCQ, GCSE results by main grades, subjects, age and gender, England, 2026 (Table 2).

RS has a higher grade 7+ rate than History (26.1%), Geography (25.1%), English Literature (19.7%), Business (19.5%), PE (23.7%) and Art and Design (23.4%). Computing is closer at 29.9%. At grade 4+, RS is also above History, Geography, Business and Computing, and essentially level with English Literature.

This is particularly relevant for option discussions. The national outcomes do not support portraying GCSE RS as an academically weak humanities choice. They do, however, reflect different entry populations, so subject-to-subject comparisons should be contextual rather than used as a “difficulty ranking”.

OFQUAL + FFT

What the wider analytical sources add

Ofqual Analytics is England-only. Its GCSE outcomes tool provides full-course outcomes from 2008-2026 and a 16-year-old view from 2013-2026, with cumulative/non-cumulative grades and female/male breakdowns. For RS departments it is the best official route for checking whether an apparent all-age pattern also holds for the usual age-16 cohort.

Ofqual also provides subject-selectable lenses on centre type, region/local area and other contextual dimensions. These matter because national subject averages combine schools with very different intakes, curriculum policies and entry practices. A department should therefore compare itself with RS nationally and with appropriate contextual peers, not simply with the headline all-subject figure.

FFT's value is different: it synthesises the whole GCSE market. In 2026, England grade 7+ rose only 0.1 percentage point and grade 4+ by 0.2; the overall gender gap narrowed again; total GCSE entries rose 0.7%; and subject entry movements varied substantially. FFT also resolves the apparent RS contradiction between provisional and final figures: provisional combined full/short course entries fell, whereas final full-course entries rose.

Source: Ofqual Analytics, GCSE outcomes in England, 2008-2026; Ofqual, Qualification results in England: summer 2026; FFT Education Datalab, GCSE and Level 1/2 results 2026: The main trends in grades and entries.

FOR SUBJECT LEADS

A practical 2026 benchmarking framework for England

Separate participation from attainment. Track entries as a proportion of the eligible cohort as well as raw entry numbers.

Use both high-grade and standard-pass thresholds. Benchmark grade 7+ and grade 4+ rather than relying on one measure.

Analyse girls and boys separately. The RS attainment gap is more than twice the overall GCSE grade-7+ gender gap.

Benchmark against similar subjects. Use similar subjects in your own school as well as national RS. History, Geography and English Literature are particularly useful comparators.

Use a clean time series. Keep 2019 as the pre-pandemic anchor, then compare 2023-2026; annotate 2020-22 rather than treating them as normal examination years.

Investigate access, not just results. A strong national attainment profile does not show whether all pupils who would benefit from RS are being allowed or enabled to take it.

Use Ofqual's contextual views. Check the 16-year-old and contextual views in England before drawing conclusions from all-age national figures.

Central 2026 message: England's full-course GCSE RS remains large and broadly stable, with strong outcomes. The persistent gender attainment gap deserves closer departmental attention.

SOURCES

Primary datasets and analytical references

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