



The UK Linguistics Olympiad

Report to supporters: August 2020

Summary

The number of entries for Round 1 this year has been somewhat disappointing, but this may have been because of Covid-19. Round 2 had to be run online, and the International Linguistics Olympiad was cancelled. In an attempt to support competitors from state schools, we're planning to open Round 2 to a much larger number (about 80 instead of the current 16) and to provide ongoing individual online training. The residential event will be moved from March to July, and will be a training camp just for the UK squad. Other matters: the portal manager is fixing a number of flaws that have caused frustration or malfunction since it was created in 2016; Alex Bellos is writing a book full of olympiad-style problems; and our balance is growing slowly so we hope to be able to afford the next expensive international event.

The competitions

There are three separate competitions: Round 1, Round 2 and the International Olympiad. Round 1 is open to all, so it is the level at which numbers vary from year to year.

Round 1

Figure 1 shows the overall numbers from 2016, when the portal first provided reliable figures, to 2020. It shows a disappointing decline over the last two years which is discussed further below.

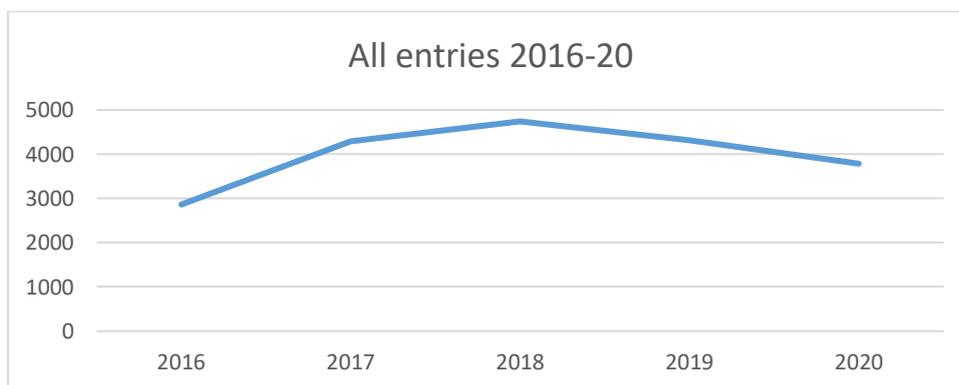


Figure 1: All UKLO entries 2016-20

The Round 1 competition is taken in schools and offered at four levels: Breakthrough, Foundation, Intermediate and Advanced (plus a level called 'Other' at which the teacher can mix and match problems at will). Figure 2 shows the entries at each level for each of the years since 2016.

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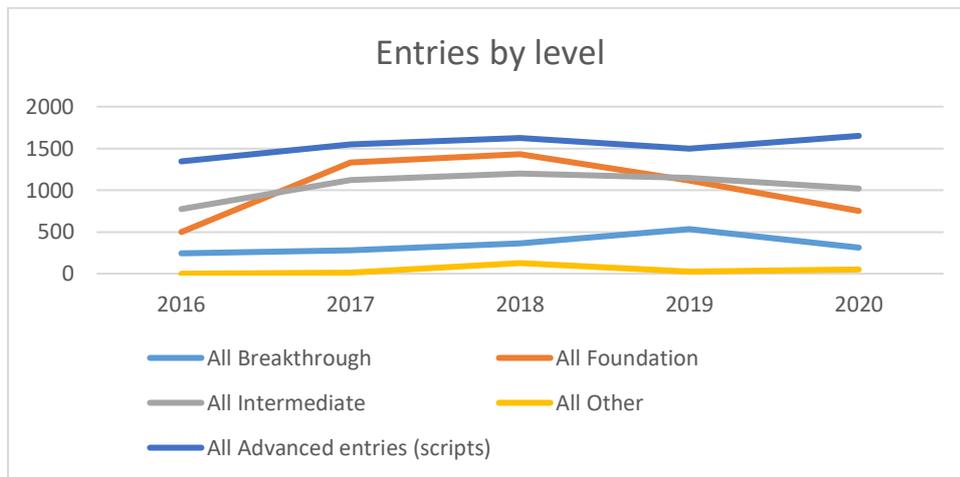


Figure 2: Entries by level, 2016-20

This year we had a small rise in the Advanced entries, but a drop in all the lower levels. We don't know the reason for this, but one possibility is Covid-19. Schools mark non-Advanced scripts themselves, and can do this at any time to suit them, so it's possible that Covid disrupted the marking process. But this wouldn't explain the steady decline in Foundation entries since the high point in 2018.

Figure 3 shows two parameters: the type of school (fee-paying or 'maintained', i.e. state-funded), and the competitor's sex. It shows an unexpected linkage between boys and maintained schools: the proportion of state schools rises or falls with the proportion of boys. Unfortunately the last two years have seen a decline in the proportions of entries both from state schools and from boys. This is disappointing, and we don't understand either the decline or the linkage. Nevertheless, the gender divide is still near to 50:50, so we can still boast that UKLO brings boys into languages as well as bringing girls into science.

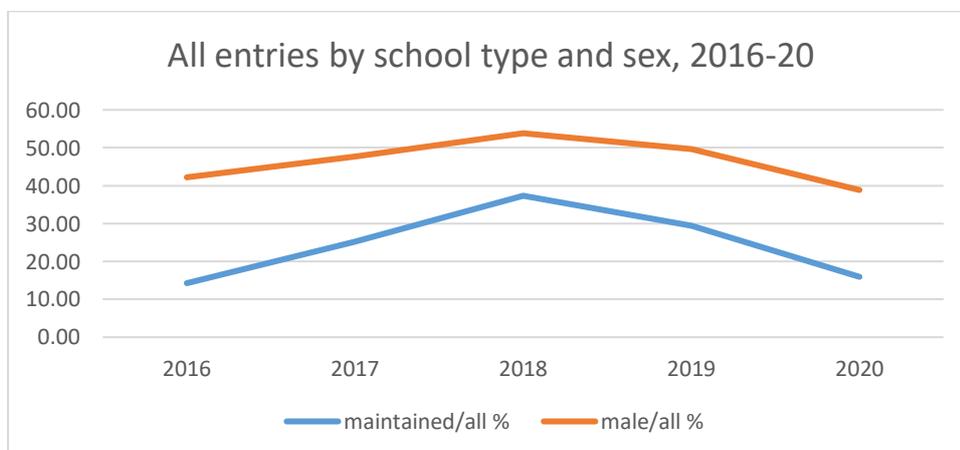


Figure 3: Entries by school type and sex, 2016-20

Because we offer the competition at a wide range of levels of difficulty, competitors also show a wide range of ages, as shown in Figure 4, which shows the percentage of all entries from each year,

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rather than absolute numbers. This shows a clear increase in the proportion of entries from Year 12 (pre-A-level), which continues this year; this may be related to the relative buoyancy of the Advanced level, the most popular level for Year 12. The figure that we are most proud of, however, is barely visible: the entries from Year 4 (14 in 2019 and 15 in 2020). We are delighted to know that our competition appeals to pupils as young as nine.

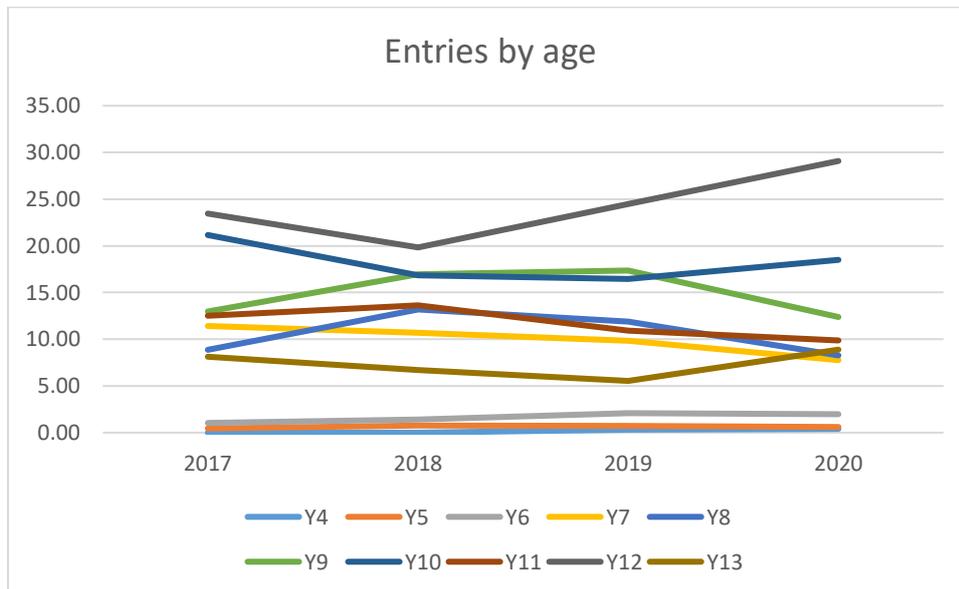


Figure 4: All entries by age as percent of total, 2017-20

Round 2

The Round 2 competition is residential and (in principle) only for the top 16 of Round 1. We were looking forward to being hosted by the University of Greenwich, but at the last minute we had to cancel it because of Covid-19. By that time the schools were also closing, which prevented us from running it in the schools, so in the end each competitor took it at home while being invigilated by Zoom. Not an ideal solution, but it worked and we selected our UK squad of eight.

Unusually, we had invited 19 rather than 16 competitors, of whom six (32%) were from state-funded schools and three were girls. But the final squad of eight that we selected on the basis of the test results were all boys, all in Year 13 (except one from Year 12), and all, without exception, taking Maths and Further Maths at A-level; most were combining this with Physics and Chemistry, and just two were taking a language (Greek and/or Latin). The link to maths is clearly something we're keen to build on (not least through the Bellos book mentioned below).

We're pleased to note that three of the eight (38%) were from state-funded schools, compared with just 23% of all the entries for the Advanced level; so the proportion of state-funded competitors increases as the difficulty rises, from 23% entering the Advanced level to 29% awarded Gold to 32% selected for Round 2 to 38% selected for the UK squad.



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Unfortunately, the international competition was also cancelled, so the squad had nowhere to go. We ran an optional competition for them in problem-writing, which four of the eight entered, producing impressive problems which we may be able to add to the international English pool of problems.

Beyond the competitions

The main development beyond the competition is that we have been in close contact with Alex Bellos, a mathematician who regularly writes maths problems for the Guardian and also writes problem books for the mass market. He got interested in our problems and decided not only to include a few in the Guardian, but also to write one of his book-fuls of language problems. We've collaborated with him, as have the Americans, and the book should be really good when it's published this October. It gives credit to UKLO, and we're hoping that it will help to raise our profile among teachers.

Infrastructure

Our portal still provides the basis for our competition at all levels by allowing automated communication with both teachers and markers. It works well, but we were aware last year of a list of things that caused occasional frustration for teachers or markers, and others that caused serious malfunction such as schools not being assigned to a marker. The Philological Society have provided a generous grant to cover our estimated costs for fixing these problems, so this has been happening during the summer. The work is being done by our portal manager, Neema Kotonya. At the time of writing this report, Neema has worked through seven items in a list of fourteen things to fix.

Reorganising the UKLO year

We've decided to bring in a radical reorganisation of the UKLO year:

- Round 1: stays the same, in early February.
- Round 2: changes from a residential event for sixteen in late March to an in-school event in mid March for a much larger number – possibly for everyone who qualifies for a Gold certificate in the Advanced competition (currently about 75). This competition will still select the UK squad for the international competition (the IOL).
- Training camp: a residential camp just for the selected squad, to take place in July just before the international competition itself.

This reorganisation brings us into line with most other countries, but also promises the following specific benefits:

- It guarantees that any potential IOL squad member will be included in the second round. We've found that the current limit of 16 has sometimes excluded really strong candidates (e.g. those who have won Gold medals in previous years!) but who had a bad day.



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- Given that (as explained above) state-funded competitors perform better at higher levels, and that we're particularly keen to encourage such competitors, the new arrangement may allow more state-funded pupils to reach the IOL squad.
- Although the new Round 2 won't offer candidates any training in IOL-style problem-solving before they take the final selection test, we can provide online guidance (via a web page) or even one-one training (which we're planning to offer through the year both to pupils and to teachers).
- The residential training camp will only include squad members, so it will be a team-building exercise where everyone knows they are training for the IOL, whereas half the participants in the current residential event will be excluded from the squad.
- The residential camp will include fewer participants so it will be cheaper for a university host, even if we extend it (as we plan to do) to three nights instead of the current two.
- Locating the residential event in July will allow university hosts to use student accommodation, rather than the hotels that several recent hosts have used.

Finances

Our accounts for the years 2017-19, with a forecast for 2021, can be downloaded from <https://www.uklo.org/reports>. The UKLO year runs from September to August, so the year called 2020 is actually the 12 months from September 2019 to August 2020. As in last year's report, these accounts show our reserves at the end of each year. (Thanks to our Interim Treasurer, Hannah Leach, for these accounts.)

Our finances are still sound and our reserves are growing slowly. This is important because of the need to build reserves for the next expensive IOL competition, Canada 2023.

Meanwhile we continue to receive donations from schools and individuals, which this year have amounted to £827 – a reduction compared with last year which may be due to Covid-19.