

AS and A Level Choice

Subjects are not perceived as being equally important

Mathematics, Chemistry, English and Biology are seen as some of the most important subjects to the students who chose them both at AS and at A2. In particular, for Year 12 students (AS level), academic subjects such as Mathematics, Chemistry or English were seen as important by almost all students who took them and other more applied subjects such as ICT, Art and Design or Drama also scored high for importance. Amongst the academic subjects, sciences received higher ratings than languages did.

The subjects that were considered more important by the Year 13 students (A2 level) who chose them were: Music, Chemistry, Further Mathematics, Biology, Mathematics and English Language. These subjects are traditional academic subjects. However, when interpreting these results it should be remembered that there are large differences in the percentages of students completing the survey who chose them.

Students in the survey completed questionnaires at the beginning of the academic year in which they undertook either their AS or their A2 courses. They were asked to rate their own subjects on a four point scale where 1 was 'Not at all important' and 4 was 'Very important'. A mean score was computed for each subject and subjects were placed in a rank order.

Top 10 AS and A2 level subjects by order of the perceived importance to students in the survey who took them					
AS			A2		
Subject	% of Students taking the subject and rating it 'Most Important'	% of Students in survey who took the subject	Subject	% of Students taking the subject and rating it 'Most Important'	% of Students in survey who took the subject
Chemistry	71.9	22.1	Music	100.0	2.3
Maths	76.8	31.7	Chemistry	79.5	19.5
Applied ICT	70.4	1.4	Further Maths	80.4	3.2
Further Maths	67.7	4.5	Maths	82.4	26.3
Music Tech	84.6	1.0	Biology	78.5	23.0
History of Art	62.5	0.9	English Language	76.2	11.1
English Lang & Lit	71.4	3.4	Accounting	70.0	2.3
English Language	63.2	10.6	Law	75.6	3.8
Biology	70.9	27.1	Art & Design/Art	71.1	14.9
Spanish	63.5	3.2	English Literature	68.7	13.7

Some notable findings were, for example, that German appeared in the bottom of the list of priorities at A2 level, while it was towards the middle of the list of priorities at AS level. In addition, Psychology, which had the third highest entry at A level, was not perceived by the students who took it as important. The subjects that were perceived as least important either at AS or A level were Psychology, Sociology, Philosophy and General Studies.

Bottom 10 AS and A2 level subjects by order of the perceived importance to students in the survey who took them					
AS			A2		
Subject	% taking the subject and rating it 'Most Important'	% of students who took the subject	Subject	% taking the subject and rating it 'Most Important'	% of students who took the subject
Psychology	51.7	27.8	Health & Social Care	60.0	3.3
Sociology	51.0	11.7	Psychology	67.9	22.9
Film Studies	48.7	2.0	French	74.1	4.5
Travel & Tourism	41.7	1.2	Geography	69.7	13.8
Philosophy	41.2	5.5	German	52.4	3.0
Communication	24.1	0.9	Sociology	66.7	10.7
Applied Science	55.6	1.0	Media Studies	59.1	10.8
Critical Thinking	8.9	4.8	Religious Studies	57.4	6.7
Citizenship	16.7	0.9	Philosophy	61.9	4.9
General Studies	6.7	15.4	General Studies	9.7	9.7

The importance of the AS/A level subjects varied by social class, gender, ethnic group, prior attainment at GCSE, and school type. For example, within the top 10 most important A2 subjects, students in the high ability group mentioned four Science/Maths subjects. On the other hand, students in the low ability group included only one Science/Maths subject and four subjects in the Humanities field. Further details on the impact on A level choice of ability, school type, social class, demographic factors and advice received are provided in the full report and in other Factsheets in this series.

Context of research

Cambridge Assessment undertook this large-scale questionnaire survey of the choices made by 4,125 AS level students and 2,472 A2 level students to determine what subjects they chose to take and what influenced their decision-making. There were approximately the same numbers of boys and girls sampled from 60 schools (Comprehensive, Grammar, Independent) and colleges (Sixth Form, Tertiary and Further Education) throughout England and the students came from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. The proportions of student gender and school type were representative of the A level populations as a whole. Students were asked to list the subjects they chose at AS and A2 level, where advice had been obtained, what advice they had been given and what had influenced the choices they had made. The differences that emerged in this research between different social class groups, gender groups, ethnic groups, ability levels and school type with regard to subject choice may have implications for the widening participation agenda.

Further information

Full details of AS and A2 level subject choice are given in the full report available at www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk

In addition to this report, comprehensive details of some aspects of examination uptake can be found in the statistical reports section of the Cambridge Assessment website.

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