

Title:	A level subject choice in England: patterns of uptake and factors affecting subject preferences Carmen L. Vidal Rodeiro Research Division, Cambridge Assessment
Abstract: (Your abstract <u>must</u> not exceed 600 words and <u>must</u> fit in this space. Please use 10pt Arial font).	<p><i>Introduction and aim of the research</i></p> <p>A new curriculum and assessment structure for students staying in education after age 16 was introduced in 2000. One of its objectives was to increase the breadth of the curriculum followed by 16-19 year olds and to increase student participation rates after compulsory schooling. This new curriculum had a major impact upon students' choice of subjects and their achievements. Recent policy developments in England provide a basis for a renewed interest in the factors affecting subject choice in the later years of schooling.</p> <p>The purpose of this research is to learn how and why students choose their subjects at AS/A level, how they combine them and what advice is given to them on subject choice and subject combinations.</p> <p><i>Data and research methods</i></p> <p>A large scale survey, using self-completion questionnaires, was conducted in September 2006 in centres with sixth forms. The centres were selected, by random stratified sampling (comprehensive schools, grammar schools, independent schools, sixth form colleges, tertiary colleges and Further Education colleges), from the set of all centres in England.</p> <p>The first part of the questionnaire gathered factual information about the students and their academic background. The second part was aimed to discover factors affecting subject choice at AS/A level and the perceptions of the chosen subjects. Information was drawn concerning feelings about subjects, reasons for choosing the subjects, advice given and career aspirations. A total of 6951 students from 60 centres completed the questionnaire.</p> <p><i>Research findings</i></p> <p>Students typically studied three or four subjects to A level and an additional subject to AS level. The subjects that were perceived as more important were Chemistry, Further Mathematics, Biology, Mathematics, Music and English. The subjects perceived as less important were Sociology, Media Studies, Religious Studies and Philosophy. This perception varied by gender and ability.</p> <p>A set of reasons for choosing subjects was given and students were asked to rate how important these reasons were at the time they made their choices. Future employment considerations and references to enjoyment, usefulness and ability dominated the responses. However, the reasons given by students depended on the nature of the subjects. There does not seem to be evidence that centres were leading students into taking particular subjects. Factors affecting subject choice were also studied by social class, ability and centre type.</p> <p>Choice was limited by the subjects offered in the centres. In some cases, subjects were offered through options blocks and students were able to make a relatively free choice from within specific subject categories (such as humanities, languages, technology, arts, etc.). The aim of this strategy was to encourage students to have a mixture of subjects thus not closing down their future options. However, students who had a particular interest in a specific area resented this grouping. In fact, some students reported that they had compromised their choices by tailoring their options to what the centres could make available.</p> <p>Parents and teachers were the most sought sources of advice when decisions about AS/A2 subjects were made. Other family members, in particular brothers and sisters, were also useful sources of information. Formal careers education and guidance appeared to have less influence than family but they played an important role in the decision making process.</p> <p>Finally, for most of the students, the major motive for staying in education after age 16 was the wish to go to University. However, there was a large percentage of students that had not made up their minds with regard to what to do after their A level courses.</p>