

AS and A Level Choice

17-year-olds make sensible choices

- Students, in general, chose their subjects because they thought they would find them interesting or because they thought they would enjoy them
- Usefulness for the future (career, job or training) featured as an important factor on the students' decisions
- Students were also very influenced by the perception of their ability in the subject
- Perceived level of easiness/difficulty of a subject had *little* influence on choice
- Other factors investigated (for example, timetabling, pressure from the school in making choices, liking of the teacher, influence of friends) had no major influence on the choice

The fact that a subject would be interesting was the major influence in students' decision-making process at AS and A2 level. This reason was rated 'Very Important' more than 80% of the time when students were asked to rate 16 possible reasons for deciding on their AS or A2 level subjects. The next major influences were the usefulness of the subject to their future career (rated 'Very Important' 79% of times) and the fact that the subject would be enjoyable (rated 'Very Important' 78% of times). The students' previous results and expected results also played an important part in the choices (rated 'Very Important' approximately 69% of times).

Usefulness for a future career featured as the most important reason for choosing subjects such as Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics, Business Studies, ICT/Applied ICT, and Accounting. This reason also featured strongly in relation to Law, Economics, and PE/Sport. In contrast, in subjects such as Psychology, History, History of Art, Art & Design, Music, Media Studies, and Drama reasons relating to interest and enjoyment outnumbered those relating to ability or usefulness for a career. Ability featured least in the cases of Psychology, General Studies, Law, Critical Thinking and History of Art, but these subjects are not available at GCSE level, making it difficult for students to judge their ability in these subjects.

The reasons with *least* impact for choosing A level subjects proved to be:

- 'the school put pressure on me to take this subject'
- 'I needed this subject to complete numbers'
- 'my friends were taking this subject'

Reasons for choosing their subject at A level given by students completing the survey		
Reason	% of times rated 'Very Important'	% of times rated 'Not at all Important'
I thought it would be an interesting subject	80.3	12.1
I thought the subject would be useful for my future career	79.2	22.2
I thought I would enjoy this subject	78.0	12.8
I was good at GCSE in this subject	69.1	39.9
I thought I would do well in this subject	68.8	10.4
I thought it was a good subject to have	67.2	15.9
I was good at AS level in this subject	62.2	14.9
This subject is a requirement for the university degree I want to study	54.8	49.3
It was a new subject for me and sounded exciting	46.1	66.9
I liked the teacher/the teacher was good	34.2	47.2
I was advised to take this subject	26.5	60.7
I thought it would be an easy subject	17.7	58.2
This subject fitted well in my timetable	17.4	65.2
I needed this subject to make up the numbers of subjects to study	11.9	81.9
The school put pressure on me to take this subject	8.8	85.9
My friends were taking this subject	7.4	80.3

Further details on the impact on A level choice of ability, school type, social class, demographic factors and advice given to students 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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