

AS and A Level Choice

Prior attainment has an impact

Students' prior GCSE attainment had an impact on their choices of AS and A2 level subjects. The higher the students' prior GCSE results had been, the more likely they were to have chosen science/mathematics subjects like Mathematics, Biology, Chemistry, Physics and Further Mathematics. The lower the students' GCSE results had been, the more likely they were to have chosen newer/vocational/technology subjects like Business Studies, Media Studies, Art and Design, ICT and Computing. The choice of English subjects varied relatively little according to prior attainment.

Differences were apparent when the top 10 subjects chosen at A2 were grouped by area:

The top 10 subjects chosen by High attainers comprised 4 Science/Maths subjects, 3 Humanities, 2 English Language or Literature subjects and 1 Arts subject.

The top 10 subjects for Medium attainers comprised 2 Science/Maths subjects, 5 Humanities, 1 English Language or Literature subject, 1 Arts and 1 Business/Technology subject.

The top 10 subjects for Low attainers comprised 1 Science/Maths subjects, 5 Humanities, 1 English language or literature subject, 1 Arts and 2 Business/Technology subjects.

The importance that students attached to their chosen subjects varied from AS and A2 and this was most pronounced for the Low attainers. Four Science/Mathematics subjects were among the most important to Low attainers at AS level, but this figure dropped to only one at A2 level. Four Science/Mathematics subjects were also among the most important to High attainers at AS level, but, in contrast to the Low attainers, this figure rose to five at A2 level. Students in the Low attaining group rated four Humanities subjects among the most important at A2 level, while Medium and High attainers rated only one Humanities subject among the most important at A2 level.

There was a considerable difference between the 3 attainment groups in the amount of advice that the students said they had received. Of the High attainers, 83% said they received or sought advice, compared to 72% of the Low attainers. High attainers found that the most useful advice came from University Admission Tutors and the Internet, while Low attainers found that the most useful advice was received from parents, brothers/sisters, other students, and friends. Levels of prior attainment were related to social class and school type. 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.

[A measure of attainment was obtained by converting each student's GCSE grades to points (Grade A* = 8; A = 7; B = 6; C = 5; D = 4; E = 3; F = 2; G = 1; U = 0) and calculating a mean score. Based on the mean scores, students were divided into three groups of approximately equal size: Low, Medium and High attainers.]

Top 10 subjects at AS and A2 level chosen by students in each attainment group completing the survey						
	Low Attainment		Medium Attainment		High Attainment	
	Subject chosen at AS	Subject chosen at A2	Subject chosen at AS	Subject chosen at A2	Subject chosen at AS	Subject chosen at A2
1	Psychology	Business Studies	Psychology	Psychology	Maths	Maths
2	Business Studies	Psychology	Maths	Business Studies	Biology	Biology
3	Media Studies	Media Studies	Biology	History	Chemistry	Chemistry
4	Maths	Sociology	Business Studies	Maths	History	History
5	Sociology	Art & Design	History	Biology	Physics	Physics
6	Art & Design	ICT	Art & Design	Art & Design	Psychology	Psychology
7	General Studies	Maths	Chemistry	Geography	English Literature	Geography
8	ICT	English Literature	Geography	Sociology	Geography	English Literature
9	Biology	History	English Literature	Media Studies	General Studies	Art & Design
10	History	General Studies	Sociology	English Literature	Art & Design	English Language

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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