FACTSHEET 8

AS and A Level Choice

Future careers guide the choice of specific subjects

CAMBRIDGE ASSESSMENT

Combinations of subjects

The reason that was rated as 'very important' for most students when asked how they combined their subjects was 'required combination for future career', given by 40% of the students. Being 'the required combination for a degree at University' was rated as very important by 34% of students.

The least important reasons for choosing a particular combination were 'wanting to have a mixture of science and arts/humanities subjects', 'the combination fitting well in the timetable' and 'being advised to choose the combination'.

Other reasons students gave for choosing their combinations of AS subjects included:

- My subjects would give me both skills and knowledge
- I wanted to keep my options open
- Wasn't sure what I wanted to be when older so I chose the subjects I liked
- I chose the courses because I enjoy being creative
- I wanted subjects that complemented each other well

Reasons for choosing a combination of AS/A2 subjects and their importance given by students who completed the survey (1 - 'Not at all important' to 4 - 'Very important')

Reasons	% Rated 1	% Rated 2	% Rated 3	% Rated 4
Required combination for future career	12.4	17.0	30.7	39.9
Combination for degree at University	18.3	20.2	28.0	33.5
Fitted well in the timetable	51.4	21.9	16.6	10.2
Advised to choose the combination	46.2	29.1	18.1	6.7
Mixture of science and arts/humanities	55.5	18.2	14.7	11.6
Mixture of new and traditional subjects	43.3	22.5	21.9	12.3
Did not think about the combination	21.0	20.2	23.8	35.0

One of the aims of Curriculum 2000 was to broaden students' experiences and to discourage early specialisation. There were 4,420 different combinations of AS subjects and 1,290 different combinations of A2 subjects among the students who completed the questionnaire. Detailed analyses of the combinations of A level subjects taken for the whole population of students in England are given in Bell et al., (2005)[1] and the total number of combinations was approximately 21,000 in 2001. While this illustrates the flexibility of the A level system, it also results in low incidences of uptake, even in the most common combinations. The most common combination (where these were the total number of examinations taken) was Maths, Biology, and Chemistry (3.6%), with all other combinations being chosen by fewer than 2% of the students in this survey. Detailed analyses of the uptake of A level subject groupings and the possible consequences are provided in Bell et al., (2007)[2].

Specific subjects

Usefulness for a future career featured as the most important reason for choosing subjects such as Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics, Further Mathematics, Business Studies, ICT, and Accounting.

Specific subject choice was also heavily influenced by previous experience in the subject - being good at GCSE level featured strongly in almost every subject. However, few students were influenced by the perception of their ability in the subject when they chose Psychology, General Studies, Law, Accounting, Critical Thinking and Film Studies, as these subjects were not available at GCSE level.

Reasons relating to interest and enjoyment outnumbered those relating to ability or usefulness for a career when choosing Psychology, Sociology, History, Art & Design, Media Studies, Film Studies, Philosophy, Religious Studies, Music, Dance, Drama, Communication Studies, Design & Technology, Government & Politics and Travel & Tourism.

Reasons and Levels of Importance Given by Students who Completed the Survey for Choosing Specific Subjects		
Usefulness for Future Career (HIGH Importance)	Interest/Enjoyment (HIGH Importance)	Ability (LOW Importance)
Physics	Psychology	Psychology
Chemistry	Sociology	General Studies
Maths/Further Maths	History	Law
Business Studies	Music	Accounting
Accounting	Drama	Critical Thinking
Economics	Art & Design	Film Studies
ICT	Media Studies/Film Studies	

Full 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.

[1.] Bell, J., Malacova, E., & Shannon, M. (2005) The Changing pattern of A level/AS uptake in England. *The Curriculum Journal*, 16 (3) 391-400.
[2.] Bell, J., Malacova, E., Vidal Rodeiro, C & Shannon, M. (2007). A-level uptake: 'Crunchier subjects' and the 'Cracker effect'. *Research Matters: A Cambridge Assessment Publication*, 3, 19-25.

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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