How to choose the right subjects at GCSE and A-level

By Jake Burnett,
Vice-Principal,
Cambridge Tutors College,
London, UK

jakeburnett@ctc.ac.uk
www.ctc.ac.uk

Formerly Head of English,
West Island School, Pokfulam (1996-2008) – an ESF School
What is it?
What is an IGCSE?
How is it assessed?
Which subjects are offered?
How does it compare with HKCEE?
GCSE

- English language
- mathematics
- chemistry
- physics
- biology
- English literature
- ICT
- accounting
- religious education
- geography
- history
- Spanish
- French
- German
- Japanese
- Chinese
- law
- design
- technology
- art
- music
- drama
- media studies
- business studies
- psychology
- accountancy
- physical education
The key to GCSE selection is depth and breadth as it is likely that students will be allowed to choose between 5 and 12 subjects to study.

It is also vital to do some research about the next steps you might want to take at A level and beyond. And don’t forget desire and enjoyment!

But keep the right doors open for each individual.
For example:

- To study at HKU you must have sat at least six GCSEs in one sitting
- To gain a place on a post-graduate course to become a qualified teacher you must have English and mathematics at a C or above
- To study medicine you should have A* or A grades in all three sciences, mathematics and English
- Admission to Oxbridge relies on all A* or A grades at GCSE (as well as many other factors)
- To study medicine at Birmingham University you must have 6 A* grades
- You do not need to have studied the GCSE to take the subject at ‘A’ level in some subjects e.g. law, economics but in others it is very important e.g. mathematics, the sciences
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medicine</th>
<th>Finance / Business</th>
<th>Law</th>
<th>Engineering</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Core</td>
<td>English, mathematics</td>
<td>English, mathematics</td>
<td>English, mathematics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science and Technologies</td>
<td>chemistry, biology, physics</td>
<td>chemistry, biology</td>
<td>physics, chemistry, biology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts</td>
<td>Music, English literature</td>
<td>art, media studies</td>
<td>English literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Languages</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>Spanish, Chinese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>history, psychology</td>
<td>economics, geography</td>
<td>history, business studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What is it?
How is it assessed?
Which subjects are offered?
How many A levels are taken?
How does it compare with Hong Kong A levels?
media studies  business studies
history  geography
French  chemistry
music  mathematics
physical education  English literature
English  law
drama  Chinese
ICT  design
technology
psychology  English language
accounting  religious education
The key to GCE A level selection is making choices which will allow further study at university whilst students are able to show that they can meet the academic challenges each subject presents.

Some subjects naturally compliment each other e.g. chemistry and biology or physics and mathematics or history and English literature.

The GCE A level system helps to focus academic study in a particular direction.
‘Hard’ and ‘Soft’ Subjects?

www.policyexchange.org.uk

‘Non-preferred Subjects’ – Cambridge and LSE
accounting, art and design, business studies, design and technology, drama, theatre studies, home economics, ICT, media studies, (law)

‘Traditional Subjects’
English literature, history, mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, further mathematics, geography, French, Spanish, Latin, economics

But there are others…
For example:

✓ To gain entrance in one of the best UK universities you start with an expectation of 3 A grades and 1 AS (some ask for unit scores)
✓ Further mathematics is highly valued for any mathematics based course – few students take this very challenging subject
✓ To study medicine you must have studied chemistry, mathematics and two other ‘academic’ subjects
✓ Some universities do not want an A level in a subject to be studied at degree level, e.g. law, economics
✓ The new A* grade is yet untested
✓ You do not need to have studied the GCE to take the subject at university in some subjects e.g. business studies but in others it is vital e.g. mathematics, humanities, languages
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Choice</th>
<th>Medicine</th>
<th>Finance / Business</th>
<th>Law</th>
<th>Engineering</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Choice 1</td>
<td>chemistry</td>
<td>mathematics</td>
<td>English literature</td>
<td>mathematics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice 2</td>
<td>mathematics</td>
<td>physics</td>
<td>history</td>
<td>physics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice 3</td>
<td>physics or biology</td>
<td>further mathematics</td>
<td>French, German or Spanish</td>
<td>further mathematics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice 4 (AS level?)</td>
<td>French, geography, history, English literature, economics</td>
<td>statistics, psychology, economics, Japanese, history</td>
<td>psychology, mathematics, business studies, economics</td>
<td>art, geography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One from this list</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In making any choice...

Ideally, you should be aiming for something between these two...
How to choose the right subjects at GCSE and A-Level

By Bosworth Independent College
GCSE Subjects (Form 4 & 5)

• **Maths**
• **Sciences (Bio, Chem, Phy)**
• Business Studies
• Geography
• ICT
• Art
• EFL
## A-Level Subjects (Form 6 & 7)

- **Accounting**
- **Art**
- **Biology**
- **Business Studies**
- **Chemistry**
- **Computing**
- **Economics**
- **Further Maths**
- **Geography**
- **Law**
- **Maths**
- **Physics**
- **Psychology**
- **Sociology**
### Soft A-Level Subjects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A levels</th>
<th>IB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Accounting</td>
<td>• Business and Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Art and Design</td>
<td>• Design and Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Business Studies</td>
<td>• Information Technology in a Global Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Communication Studies</td>
<td>• Theatre Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Design and Technology</td>
<td>• Visual Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Dance</td>
<td>• Performing Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Drama/Theatre Studies</td>
<td>• Photography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Film Studies</td>
<td>• Physical Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Health and Social Care</td>
<td>• Sports Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Home Economics</td>
<td>• Travel and Tourism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[http://www.cam.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/requirements/](http://www.cam.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/requirements/)
How Many to Choose

• Minimum 3 A-Level + 1 AS subjects
• Overseas Students:
  • 3 Subjects + EFL (AS Year)
  • 3 Subjects + 1 AS subject (A2 Year)

• For Example:
  • Maths, Econ, Phy & EFL (AS Year)
  • Maths, Econ, Phy & F Maths (A2 Year)
What to Choose

• Do you know which degree you would like to study at university?

• If your answer is NO
  • Subjects Interest
  • Academic Strengths
  • Possible Career

• If your answer is YES
  • Maths, ???, ???, ???
What to Choose

• Business / Economics / Finance
  • Maths, F Maths, Econ, Bio, Chem, Phy, Business Studies / Accounting

• Engineering
  • Maths, F maths, Phy + ???

• Medicine
  • Maths, Bio, Chem, ??? + BMAT & Interview

• Law
  • Maths, Chem, Phy, Econ, Law + LNAT

• IELTS

www.bmat.org.uk

www.lnat.ac.uk