

Selecting Your A-levels

No-one should underestimate the immense *pressure* students are under when the exam results come out. More than two years of preparation which culminated in a few hours of exams, followed by a long wait is all distilled into a few letters on a piece of paper - your exam grades...

If your results were better, or worse, than expected or if you are still undecided as to your academic path, then you have some extremely important decisions ahead of you. Given that results time is traumatic enough, it is crucial to avoid making rash decisions based upon emotion rather than logic. I hope the following advice will help to clear a path that is suitable for you, through the haze of opportunities that lie ahead:

1) Aiming for a Career:

This heading is fodder for a whole book, but the aim here is to get you thinking about where you are heading. Choosing your A-levels inevitably confines the range of careers that are left open to you, so it is important to make a considered choice.

Mostly, this boils down to whether your future lies in science, business, the arts, languages, computing or a combination of these. The vast majority of you will not have a definitive career in mind. Even those that do would be foolhardy to dismiss the possibility of a change of direction. For that reason, it is wise to make choices which, as far as possible, keep open doors of opportunity. For instance, computing at A-level is not a prerequisite for a career in computing whereas maths is a prerequisite for engineering, economics and a whole lot more besides. That is not to say you shouldn't study computing at A-level, but be aware of what you are giving up to study it.

Action Plan: Find at least 10 degree courses that interest you and note the prerequisites. List, in order of frequency, the top five of these. If there is a subject which you feel you absolutely must study and is not on this list, then add it in.

2) Easy/Difficult Subjects:

Students often shy away from subjects that are considered as 'tough' (maths and physics for instance). If you are reasonably good at a subject at GCSE level, then do not allow the prospect of a little hard work to scare you away. In the long run, it is far more beneficial to possess a skill that is in great demand, but in short supply.

Action Plan: If you have excluded subjects for these reasons, then include them again, at least for now.

3) Liking a Subject:

Whilst it is important to choose subjects that you like and can perform well at, it concerns me that many students often end up with an incoherent combination. How many degree courses require the combination of Politics, Textiles and Geography?

Action Plan: Adjacent to the list of prerequisites, write all of the subjects you like and are good at. Hopefully, there will be at least 3 subjects which appear in both lists. Juggle with them until you get a few sets of 3 coherent combinations.

And finally, take as much advice as possible. Contact the careers service and do your homework. Make sure you are happy with your choice. The decisions that you make now may be the most important ones in your life - NOW, THAT'S PRESSURE!

4) Your GCSE Results:

It may seem strange that I have put this so far down in the list. Surely your GCSE grades dictate what courses you can take at A-level? NOT SO!

That grade does not always reflect your potential in a subject. Rather, the grade comprises many factors such as your approach to studying, the extent of your preparation and determination, the quality of teaching you received, your frame of mind etc.

If you have failed to score a grade B or above, most schools/colleges will suggest an easier course of study. While it is unwise to continue straight onto the A-level, they are reluctant to suggest re-sitting those exams because many students would simply fare no better second time round.

However, if you are absolutely and 100% committed to a particular course, and crucially, KNOW THAT YOU ARE GOING TO HAVE TO CHANGE TO PURSUE IT, then stick to your guns and re-sit. The extra year is a small price to pay for choosing the right path in life.

Action Plan: Cross off any subjects which you have failed to score a B or above in at GCSE. If there are no combinations left that you feel happy with, then consider carefully whether re-sitting would be in your interests.

5) What's Offered by your School/College:

Schools and Colleges virtually always offer those A-levels that are essential for the most popular degree courses.

If you find that your chosen school/college does not offer the combination you seek, then it may be that you've included a subject which is not a prerequisite for many degrees – so you can take it up at University without having studied it at A-level.

Think very carefully before choosing a school/college that is not your best choice, simply to include a subject that you could take up later on without studying it now.

Action Plan: If this applies to you, then ask your school to suggest alternatives to the combination you desire and discuss with them why they don't offer you chosen subjects.