

# AS and A Level Choice

## Social class makes a difference

Students from high social class groups were more likely to have chosen Biology, English Literature, Further Maths, Geography, History, Modern Foreign Languages, Mathematics, Music or Physics while those in lower social class groups were more likely to have chosen Psychology, Sociology, ICT, Law, Media Studies, Citizenship, Film Studies, or Health and Social Care. The level of uptake of subjects such as PE/Sport, Philosophy, Design and Technology or English Language was not dependent on the students' backgrounds.

The children of Higher Professionals (Group 2) were more likely to take Maths/Science-based subjects than any other social class group. In addition, the children of the top 2 groups were the only groups to take more Maths/Science-based subjects than subjects in any other area. This pattern was in contrast to that of the children of Lower Managers and Professionals (Group 3) who took more Humanities-based subjects than any other social class group and any other subject area. These trends indicate that children are influenced by their parents' professions and this was supported by the fact that children rated advice received from their parents as most important in their decision-making (see Factsheet 9 on Advice Received). The different patterns in subject uptake could have implications for social capital as there is evidence to suggest that taking subjects such as Maths and Physics, or those that lead to Medicine, tends to lead to higher earning power (Dolton & Vignoles, 2002\*)

Students were allocated to one of 5 groups of social class based on their parents' main occupation (or occupation when working). The groups were classified according to the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification. The 5 classifications were:

- |                      |                        |                                      |
|----------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1) Higher Managerial | 2) Higher Professional | 3) Lower Managerial and Professional |
| 4) Intermediate      | 5) Routine and Manual  |                                      |

Percentage of students from each social class group in the survey taking some of the Science-based, Arts-based, Language-based, or Humanities-based subjects at AS and A2 level										
Subject	AS					A2				
	Social Class Group					Social Class Group				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Science Based: Maths	32.2	<b>36.2</b>	27.2	27.4	30.7	24.9	<b>29.7</b>	23.6	23.2	26.6
Physics	15.8	<b>18.3</b>	12.6	10.9	12.0	12.9	<b>15.5</b>	9.2	10.4	10.7
Chemistry	20.9	<b>27.3</b>	18.8	19.8	17.1	19.7	<b>23.5</b>	16.3	16.4	18.0
Arts Based: Music	3.2	3.5	2.9	2.4	0.9	0.9	3.2	2.2	3.5	0.4
Art & Design	16.4	17.7	17.0	15.3	13.2	14.6	16.3	15.4	14.0	11.9
Media	11.0	9.6	14.4	14.4	13.2	9.0	9.4	13.3	10.9	9.4
Languages: Eng. Lang	12.1	10.4	8.9	12.2	9.3	15.5	10.4	9.4	9.8	10.2
Eng. Lit	16.5	17.6	16.9	14.7	14.3	10.3	14.5	15.0	13.1	13.9
French	7.9	9.5	8.4	5.1	3.7	6.4	5.5	5.2	2.8	2.5
Humanities: History	27.3	25.1	<b>22.8</b>	16.7	14.4	22.7	24.4	<b>21.5</b>	15.2	16.4
Psychology	24.6	23.9	<b>29.3</b>	28.0	31.2	20.2	21.0	<b>25.3</b>	22.5	25.0
Sociology	8.1	8.2	<b>12.8</b>	13.8	16.1	11.6	7.1	<b>12.2</b>	12.1	13.1

A core group of the same seven subjects appeared in the top 10 choices for all five social class groups classified (Mathematics, Biology, Chemistry, Psychology, Geography, Business Studies, and History). Thereafter, the uptake of subjects diverged. Art & Design was common to the top four social class groups while English Literature was common to the lowest four groups. Physics featured in the top 10 choices of children of the two highest social class groups only, while Sociology featured in the top 10 choices of children of the two lowest social class groups only. Students from higher social class groups were more likely than students from lower social class groups to have chosen Modern Foreign Languages.

The children in each social class group did not attach the same level of importance to the AS and A2 level subjects they chose as children in other social class groups did. For example, students whose parents were higher managers gave more importance to English Language, Economics and Business Studies than their counterparts from other social class groups and chose them because they would be interesting. More students from lower social class backgrounds than from the higher social class backgrounds chose a subject because it was new and exciting.

Social class background also influenced the quantity and importance of advice received when making AS and A2 subject choices. Children of the higher professionals received more advice than their counterparts in other social class groups. The children that received less advice were those of the routine and manual workers. In addition, there were considerable differences between the students by social class with regard to the type of advice received. For example, as the social class of the students decreased, they were less likely to have sought advice from parents, brothers or sisters, teachers in the secondary school, other students or friends, university admission tutors and the internet. The perceived importance of the advice also varied by social class. For example, children whose parents had a university degree acknowledged more advice than those whose parents did not (80% and 76% of students, respectively) and they gave more importance to the advice obtained from brothers and/or sisters, university admission tutors, speakers from higher education and the internet than the children whose parents did not have a degree. Further details on the impact on A level choice of social class, ability, school type, demographic factors and advice given to students are provided in the full report and in other Factsheets in this series.

\*(Dolton, P. & Vignoles, A. 2002. The Return on Post-Compulsory School Mathematics Study. *Economica*, 69, pp. 113-142. Available at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=308892>)

### **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](http://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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