

Choosing the right A-Levels

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One of the most difficult decisions pupils are asked to make when they join the Upper School is to select the subjects they would like to study in Year 12. With A levels it is always helpful to have an eye ahead to the next stage, which for most Dulwich boys will mean a university course. The entrance requirements for the vast majority of courses at prestigious universities require applicants to have three high A level grades in any subject. There are exceptions, of course, and those wanting to study Medicine will have taken Chemistry and, most likely, Biology and Maths. Most Engineering courses will expect Maths and Physics or Chemistry and some may ask for Further maths.

All pupils are encouraged to pay an early visit to the Careers and Higher Education teams in the Lord George Building. Staff are on hand to offer the latest advice about university entry requirements, in the UK and overseas, or applying for post A-level apprenticeships, which are increasingly popular and fiercely competitive. These conversations should take place *before* a pupil embarks on A level study.

It is true that some pupils are so academically able they can choose any combination of subjects and achieve A* grades. For the vast majority, however, there tends to be areas where pupils are strongest, whether it be Maths and Science or the Arts and Humanities. Breadth need not be forced for the sake of it. The UK system allows for early specialism and there is some sense in choosing subjects where aptitudes and content complement each other.

The most obvious example would be Maths, Physics, Chemistry and Biology. A theme to Humanities' subjects might be History, Economics, Politics and English, where the core theme would be essay writing.

Pupils, or parents, should not assume GCSE A* in any subject is necessarily an indicator of success at A level. Maths, Science or languages are only useful in the long term if pupils have an interest in and the aptitude to complete these subjects to advanced level.

Many Year 11 pupils mistakenly believe that an A* in GCSE Maths means they are suited to studying the subject at A level and that a successful career (i.e. a well-paid job) is contingent on it. Whilst it is true that highly remunerated City-based jobs will often expect candidates to have studied A level Maths, it is also true that a top grade is also required and not simply the subject per se. Even if a pupil were to achieve two A* grades in other subjects and a C or D in, say, Maths the opportunities of the offer of a place at a high-ranking university would be much more challenging.

Pupils should not be bashful when it comes to selecting subjects that play to their strength. Playing to their strengths is what they will do eventually when going into the workplace; almost everyone has strengths in some areas and limitations in others. A*A*A* or A*A*A grades will open far more doors than A*A*C.

Pupils who embark on A level courses in September will know very quickly whether they are out of their depth. If they find they

are, they should talk first with the relevant subject teachers and their form tutor as soon as possible. The Head of Year, Mr Quayle, and Head of Upper School, Mr Richard Berlie, will be on hand with advice. In most cases pupils will need to adjust to more being demanded of them. Good communication between pupils and teachers is essential in order to discern the right path forward.

