

AS and A Level Choice

Ethnicity has some effect



Overall, there were only small differences between the choices of AS and A2 level subjects made by students who identified themselves as 'white' and those who identified themselves as 'non-white' in the study. However, there were some notable differences in how likely different ethnic groups were to take certain subjects. For example, at A2 level, 'non-white' students were about twenty times more likely to choose Accounting than 'white' students were and twice as likely to choose Economics, Mathematics, Chemistry and Sociology.

In comparison to the white group, Black African, Chinese, Indian, Pakistani and students from a mixed background were more likely to take two or more Maths/Science subjects. Some minorities, such as Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi, were less likely to take Modern Foreign Languages.

Those who identified themselves as 'white' were slightly more likely than 'non-white' students to have chosen Art and Design, Drama, PE-Sport, English Language, English Literature, History, Geography, or Modern Foreign Languages. On the other hand, those who identified themselves as 'non-white' students were more likely than 'white' students to have chosen science subjects (Biology, Chemistry, Mathematics or Physics) and more practical subjects such as Accounting, Economics, Business Studies or ICT.

Top 10 subjects at AS and A2 level chosen by students in each ethnic group completing the survey							
Students identifying themselves as 'White'				Students identifying themselves as 'Non-White'			
Subject	% of students at AS	Subject	% of students at A2	Subject	% of students at AS	Subject	% of students at A2
Psychology	27.6	Psychology	22.8	Maths	44.8	Maths	40.5
Maths	26.7	History	22.2	Biology	34.3	Biology	30.3
Biology	24.0	Maths	21.1	Chemistry	32.9	Chemistry	30.1
History	23.2	Biology	19.5	Psychology	26.9	Psychology	23.0
Geography	17.9	Art & Design	16.2	Business Studies	23.7	Business Studies	22.4
Art & Design	17.8	Geography	15.4	Physics	17.0	Sociology	17.2
Chemistry	17.6	Business Studies	15.2	Sociology	16.1	History	15.4
English Lit	17.1	Chemistry	14.7	History	14.7	Physics	14.7
General Studies	15.6	English Literature	14.3	ICT	14.4	ICT	12.0
Business Studies	15.2	Media Studies	12.1	Economics	12.2	English Literature	10.6

There were some considerable differences between students who identified themselves as 'white' and those who identified themselves as 'non-white' in terms of the importance given to the subjects they had chosen. At AS level, 'white' and 'non-white' students listed Chemistry, Maths, and Further Maths among the top 10 most important subjects, but then the groups diverged. The 'white' students also rated Applied ICT, History of Art, PE/Sport and Art & Design in the top 10 subjects that were most important to them, whereas the 'non-white' group listed Biology, Physics, Law, and Accounting in their top 10 most important subjects. The picture was slightly different at A2 level, where Maths, Chemistry, Physics, Biology and English Literature were among the top 10 most important subjects for both ethnic groupings. In addition, the 'white' group also saw Art & Design, English Language, PE/Sport, and Law as important, whereas the 'non-white' group listed ICT, Business Studies, Psychology and Sociology in their top 10 in terms of importance.

Care should be taken when interpreting results from this study as the numbers of students were not equal in each ethnic group. Approximately 72% of the students identified themselves as 'white' and 21% identified themselves as being in one of 9 other ethnic groups. The small numbers of students in some of the ethnic groups may not be representative of the population of students in that ethnic group taking AS and A2 level subjects.

It is not known whether differences in subject choices made by different ethnic groups have an origin in family attitudes towards education and towards what subjects and courses are seen to lead to professional careers. Further 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.

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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