

AS and A Level Choice

17-year-olds know how to seek advice

Students acknowledged receiving advice regarding their AS/A2 level choices but there were differences in the amount and perceived importance of advice between the social class groups, prior attainment levels and schools attended.

Parents were the most sought source of advice when decisions about A level subject choices had to be made - 43% of students in the survey acknowledged receiving advice from their parents. Teachers were the second source of advice, with around 38% of students regarding them as advisors.

However, the advice from parents and teachers was not considered by students as the most *useful* they had received. Here are some comments about the influence of their parents on students' choices:

- *Pressure from parents to become a doctor was why I chose Physics which I have now dropped, because I don't want to be a doctor*
- *I had to work around the fact that my parents forbid me to drop Mathematics*
- *My parents forced me!!!*

The advice that was most valued by AS/A2 level students concerned the choices they should make for University admission and came from University Admission Tutors and the internet.

Other family members, in particular brothers and sisters, were also useful sources of information. For some students, a very important source of advice was that based on their brothers' or sisters' recent experience with AS/A2 level courses or in a job.

Formal careers education and guidance was also important but was less influential than family. The least useful advice was considered to be that from school leaflets and other students or friends.

Around 80% of the students who completed the questionnaire acknowledged receiving SOME KIND of advice while the other 20% claimed that they had been solely responsible for their own decisions.

There were considerable differences, related to social class, in the source of advice received and importance attached to it. For example, children of the higher professionals received more advice than their counterparts in other social class groups. The children that received the least advice were those of the routine and manual workers. As the social class of the students decreased, they were less likely to have sought advice from parents, brothers or sisters, teachers, other students or friends, university admission tutors and the internet. In addition, children whose parents worked in the intermediate professions were more likely to have sought advice from open day or careers events. On the other hand, children of the higher professionals were the least likely to have sought advice from these sources. There were not significant differences among the social class groups in other sources of advice.

Sources and Importance of Advice to AS and A2 level Students Completing the Survey		
Source of Advice	% of Students in Survey	Ranking of Importance
Parents	42.5	9
Teachers in your secondary school	37.9	8
Other students/friends	21.1	11
Brothers and/or sisters	16.1	3
Interview at the sixth form centre	15.0	7
Internet (e.g. university admission requirements)	14.0	1
Open day/Career events	11.7	4
Guidance at this school/college after starting courses	10.5	10
School leaflets	8.4	12
Speakers from higher education institutions	6.6	6
Speakers from employment	4.7	5
University admission tutors	4.6	2

Importantly, around 17% of the students in this survey found that the amount of advice they received was *not enough to make a well-informed decision* about their choices of AS/A level subjects. Other students said that, rather than the amount of advice being insufficient, *it was the timing of advice that was wrong*. Students felt that they were not being given careers advice at a sufficiently early age to allow them to make informed choices and they did not receive a full picture of the consequences of their subject choices. Advice on subject choice and on the alternatives open to students should begin earlier in the secondary school years in order not to have restricted opportunities later and needs to be re-introduced on different occasions. Also, given the developments of new routes through the 14-19 qualification system, including the development of National Diplomas, *there is a need to ensure that students not only have the advice they need but the necessary skills to make use of it*.

Sources, amount and importance of advice also varied according to the ability of the students and the schools they attended. For example, low ability students recalled having had less advice than high ability students did and low ability students put the highest value on their family's advice while high ability students valued the advice of University Admission Tutors most. Students in Grammar or Independent schools acknowledged more advice than students in other types of schools. Further details regarding the impact of social class, ability and school type on the amount and perceived importance of advice are given 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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