



Three or Four A Levels? Guidance for SM6 applicants and parents/carers

Students enrolling on A level courses sometimes ask this question, thinking that quantity of qualifications will improve their chances of securing places at the leading universities. The following advice has been formulated following our experience of many years of work with thousands of sixth formers, and at SM6 we are committed to giving students the most up to date advice and guidance which will maximise their advantage when preparing for their next steps after sixth form. However, no advice can be absolutely correct for every individual or accurate for every single degree course and can never be completely up to date. Therefore, it is important you read this advice as well as conducting your own research into your degree course interests and wider advice about your own plans and needs.

Generally speaking, taking four A levels to impress competitive universities is **misguided**. At university, quality of learning matters far more than quantity of learning:

- Performing very well in 3 A levels, securing outstanding predicted grades at the end of the first year of A level study is much more important.
- A*AA is nearly always better than AAAA at getting into top Uni courses. It is much harder to get AAAA than A*AA. Do the maths, as they say!
- Highly competitive courses will require at least one A* grade in one of your A levels, regardless of the degree subject you want to study.
- All competitive universities have been clear that they **do not** expect students to be studying four A level subjects.
- High entry tariff university courses generally prefer depth of knowledge, rather than breadth of knowledge. This means that to impress, you are better off taking an Extended Project, doing some of your own depth and wider reading, completing work placements or independent study tasks, than a fourth A level. Interviews at competitive universities will almost certainly include some exploration of your independent learning beyond the curriculum you are studying – studying 3 A levels will allow you time for personal work around this.

There are three general reasons for studying four A levels and only one of these is the 'right' reason:

1. Four A levels look better than three – **incorrect**. It is the grades of the three A levels and the subjects those A levels are in that are important. Put all your efforts into those three A levels – thousands of other students nationally, who got 8s and 9s at GCSE are doing that and you are competing with them!
2. Four A levels to start with takes the risk out of trying to choose the right A levels to take into the second year – **incorrect**. Trying to study four A levels (alongside your Personal Development and enrichment, and any part-time jobs, driving lessons, social life and other responsibilities typical of a sixth former) with a view to dropping one after a year is generally not a good strategy. Each A level is a lot of work (at least 9 hours of work every week per subject), and you are much better off making a decision

about which three to take and which subject you will not take at A level, and working hard on your three A levels than spreading yourself too thinly, feeling overly stretched in the Autumn Term and generally not coping with everything. Our experience also shows that by the time the 4th A level is dropped, there is already an impact on students' performance across the other 3 because they've been stretched too thinly during the first year. So, give your A levels the best start you can – first of all, do some research around careers or university courses you might be interested in during Year 11, and then make the most of opportunities like our Open Events, Taster Day, and the Transition Work to help you decide which are the right subjects, and then take three!

3. There are four A level subjects you absolutely love, **you want to study them all for two years** and you are very aware of the workload and confident you'll cope with four A levels. You are not trying to impress anyone; you are just wanting to study four subjects you would absolutely love. **Correct** – now check your thinking out with some specialist advice and make the most of our opportunities to get further information. Our information and guidance on study programmes also sets some minimum expectations around prior GCSE performance which will apply to any student wanting to discuss a 4 –A level programme.

Double Maths (A level Maths and Further Maths)

- You don't have to be academically amazing across the board to study Double Maths.
- You do need to really enjoy maths, though.
- You also need to meet our Entry Requirements if you wish to take Double Maths with two other A levels.
- If you choose Double Maths and one other A level course, you should agree a backup second A level single course at interview, just in case you need to drop down to A level single Maths at enrolment once you have your GCSE Results. You will need to start sixth form with 3 A level (or equivalent) subjects on your timetable.
- You should *always* consider whether Double Maths is right for you within the content of:
 - The other A level subjects you wish to study.
 - Whether you wish to study one other A level or two other A levels with Double Maths.
 - The points made above about A* grades.
 - The general points made below about degree subject entry criteria.

Russell Group – Informed Choices <https://www.informedchoices.ac.uk/>

There is a lot of misunderstanding and misinformation about which A level combinations the Russell Group and other top, competitive universities and courses are looking for from applicants. Use the Informed Choices website to find the correct information on the subject requirements for specific degrees, as well as the degrees that will be open to you based on the subject choices you are considering.

Guidance on entry criteria for degree subjects at universities

Once again, it is essential that you check on university websites to find out the absolute facts on entry requirements if you have a specific degree course or university in mind. **A degree of misconception and misinformation continues to persist relating to Level 3 Vocational options and their validity for HE study.** Please bear in mind that when visiting university entry criteria pages you will always have to scroll down to find the alternatives to A levels accepted by universities, but the vast majority of courses will accept Level 3 BTECs/CTECs as valid qualifications for entry; this includes certain courses at Oxford and Cambridge and other Russell group universities. High grades in these qualifications are considered equivalent to high grades in A levels and are awarded equivalent UCAS points.

BTEC/CTEC Level 3 Extended Diploma	T Level Grade	A Level Grades	UCAS Points	A Level Grade	EPQ Grade	UCAS Points
D* D* D*	Distinction*	A* A* A*	168	A*		56
D* D* D		A* A* A	160	A		48
D* D D		A* A A	152	B		40
D D D	Distinction	A A A	144	C		32
D D M		A A C	128		A*	28
	Merit		120	D	A	24
D M M		A C C	112		B	20
M M M	Pass (C or above on the core)	C C C	96	E	C	16
M M P		C C E	80		D	12
	Pass (D or E on the core)		72		E	8
M P P		C E E	64			
P P P		E E E	48			

The following advice acts as 'general' advice to help you decide on your Level 3 choices, and relates generally to HE study and in particular to the most competitive universities. The overall profile created by your three A Level choices is important. It is impossible to write an exhaustive list here (and you do need to conduct your own research) but one example includes Maths A Level enhancing architecture, and some Psychology and Philosophy university applications and being essential for leading Economics courses. Our friendly and highly-experienced SM6 staff can provide some guidance at interview and at enrolment.

Engineering: Double Mathematics and Physics is almost essential for the leading competitive universities. ***You must check this carefully.***

Humanities: There is definitely no advantage to be gained in studying four A levels. The only possible exception to that guidance may be for bi-lingual students who wish to study their 'second language' at A level. Some universities will not accept an A level in the 'second language' of a bi-lingual student as part of a three A level offer and therefore three 'other' A levels may be required. Students need to check this carefully with potential universities. An Extended project is an excellent option for competitive Humanities degrees, as it will allow you to explore beyond your A level curriculum and demonstrate independent study skills.

Mathematics: Increasingly leading universities think A level Maths single does not discriminate effectively at the top end of ability. Double Maths (A level Maths and Further Maths) is almost essential for Cambridge, Oxford, Imperial, Warwick and other leading universities. Cambridge and Imperial use

STEP as the sieve and universities such as Oxford, Imperial, Warwick, Durham and Lancaster are turning to a pre-admissions test such as MAT to help distinguish the best mathematicians.

Medicine, Dentistry or Veterinary Science: A programme of three A levels is perfectly adequate but these should include Biology and **must include Chemistry**. It is possible, but it is rarer for students to secure a place on medicine without Biology. UKCAT entrance tests are what universities use for selection, in addition to Biology and Chemistry A level grades and a third A level result. There is a minority of Russell Group universities requiring three science A levels for medicine – most universities allow a free choice of your third subject. For an Oxbridge Medicine application then a third science would help.

Mathematics is considered a science and, for a few universities, Psychology is as well. Given the central importance of substantial work experience to a competitive application, along with the requirement to gain A* grades and perform well in entrance tests, a programme of four A levels is generally a mistake. An Extended project in your second year is a good option, if you are determined to gain a fourth qualification, instead of taking four A levels.

Sciences: Studying 3 A levels, two of which are sciences, is the basis for a strong, competitive application. Maths is always an advantage when taking sciences but is not always essential. Cambridge now publishes [information](#) which explicitly states the differing expectations of the Colleges for Natural Sciences. Whilst these guidelines are just stated by Cambridge ... they are helpful for other leading universities too, such as Imperial College and Durham. Studying all three sciences (or two sciences and maths) can be very helpful for Natural Sciences applications. Colleges would expect Maths, and would see having 3 as an advantage, and at least AS Further Maths for anyone heading in the Physics direction as important. There may be, in exceptional cases, an advantage for a student taking four A levels but only when two of those are Mathematics and Further Mathematics and the other two are sciences. However, taking a fourth A level for just interest and pleasure **is not an advantage** and universities will always favour A* and A grades over extra courses. Again, the time can be spent on preparing for entrance assessments and developing wider experiences if you are considering an application to the most competitive universities.

If you would like to make any changes to your requested subjects, please do so at interview. If you have already had your interview and wish to reconsider your requested subjects, please contact the Admissions Team by email at: sm6apply@smchull.org

Please include your name and date of birth in your email to them.