



Three or Four A Levels?

Guidance for BHASVIC applicants

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 by BHASVIC following many years of work with thousands of sixth formers. 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.
- 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 (which is a prescribed course, with the structure given to you and you being told what to learn and revise).

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 when you don't want to gain four A level qualification is generally not a good strategy. Each A level is a lot of work 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. Give your A levels the best start you can – 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 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.

Double 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 the [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, just in case you need to drop down to A level **single** Maths at enrolment or after your GCSE Results.
- 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.
 - Whether AS Further Maths taken in your second year is more appropriate for you than Double Maths across two years.
 - 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.

BHASVIC's degree subjects at competitive universities guidance

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. However, the following advice acts as 'general' advice to help you decide on your A level choices.

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 examples are Maths A Level enhancing architecture, some Psychology and Philosophy Uni applications and being essential for leading Economics courses.

BHASVIC staff can provide some guidance at interview and at enrolment.

Engineering:

Double Mathematics and Physics is *almost* essential for leading 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.

Mathematics:

Increasingly leading universities think A level Maths single does not discriminate effectively at the top end of ability.

Double Maths is almost essential for Cambridge, Oxford, Imperial, Warwick and other leading Unis.

A level Maths single & AS Further Maths is a good idea for 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.

Medicine, Dentistry or Veterinary Science:

A programme of three A levels is generally perfectly adequate but these should include Biology and must include Chemistry. It is possible, but it is very rare for students to secure a place on medicine without Biology. UKCAT and/or BMAT 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 and most 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, a programme of four A levels is very often a mistake.

An Extended project or AS Further Maths in your *second year* is a good option, if you are determined to gain a fourth qualification, instead of taking four A levels.

Sciences:

A three A levels programme, 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. AS Further Maths can be helpful to take in your second year.

Cambridge now publishes a table 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 Unis too, such as Imperial 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.

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: admissions@bhasvic.ac.uk. Please include your name and date of birth in your email to them.

We look forward to seeing you at Moving On Day after GCSE exams have finished.

Kind regards,

James Moncrieff,

Deputy principal