



November 2017

A guide to A-level choices

The Sixth Form will be the most exciting time at St Helen and St Katharine. At the core of all that we will offer you are the subjects you choose to study at A-level.

The first and most important thing is to choose the subjects you want to study and have a real passion for; we recommend you choose four areas of study: three A-levels plus something else, which can be another A-level or something from the breadth and depth options. Every week you will be spending seven periods in lessons and considerable time in independent study for each of your A-level subject, including commitment to after school sessions, theatre trips etc, so it makes sense to choose subjects you find interesting and stimulating. Play to your strengths: the subjects you enjoy are generally the ones that you will do best so you should choose subjects that you feel confident in, are interested in and enjoy. This should lead you to a Higher Education course that reflects your interests and strengths.

All the subjects offered at St Helen's are challenging and academically rigorous – there are no soft options. Make sure you choose the combination of subjects that is right for you; there is further advice about combinations below. University offers are generally for three A-levels with good grades rather than specific subjects. There are a few vocational courses – such as medicine, veterinary medicine and engineering – where subject requirements are more specific. Any of you aiming towards these courses should research entry requirements with care and seek specialist advice, go and talk to the Careers and Higher Education Department. Get all the information and guidance you need from them and from other people at school and at home: subject teachers, form tutors, heads of departments, parents, and girls in the Sixth Form (although bear in mind there will be changes in some courses) are all valuable sources but remember this is your choice!

Here are some useful points to bear in mind when choosing your subjects:

New subjects

It is not unusual to want to start two or more subjects that you have not studied at I/GCSE for example psychology or economics. Be aware of the fact that picking up more than two new subjects that you have not studied before can be difficult, as you have to build up your skill and knowledge from a minimal base. This can be a considerable challenge! For that reason, it may not be wise to choose more than two new subjects although some girls do manage this successfully.

Subject combinations

Some subjects require regular, scheduled time commitment out of lessons which is on top of the requirement for any subject. Art requires attendance at life class on a regular basis. There will be theatre trips and also the possibility of a lesson extending until 4.45pm for theatre studies. There will be performances for those studying music. Clashes (for instance when rehearsals and concerts happen at the same time) mean that to take two or more of these subjects together will require commitment, determination and excellent time management.

It is not necessary to take A-level mathematics with biology or chemistry or physics. The mathematical content of the science A-level courses is taught within the subject timetable. If you would like to study mathematics to support A-level sciences, you could take AS mathematics over two years, rather than committing to the full A-level.

Higher Education subject requirements

Some universities have published a list of 'preferred' subjects that they feel provide a suitable preparation for most of the courses they offer. These vary from institution to institution and you are advised to research these online should you have a specific course or university in mind, although this would be unusual at this stage.

Facilitating subjects

These subjects are mathematics, sciences, languages, English literature, history and geography. There has been a lot of media attention paid to the Russell Group document 'Informed Choices', with the media stating that universities only want these subjects. This is far from true and the general advice is that universities would normally require three A-levels with two from a published list of preferred subjects and any subject as a third. Hence, any combination of subjects you choose at St Helen's will fulfil these criteria. If you are really stuck then sound advice would be for you to choose a facilitating subject.

If there is a chance that you will wish to read for a science degree, think carefully if you opt for physics plus biology without chemistry. Lack of chemistry may limit the choice of Higher Education courses available.

Degree courses in physics, natural sciences, architecture and engineering generally require at least AS mathematics, and often A-level mathematics, so if there is any chance of a degree course in these areas, mathematics should be considered (but it is not essential for medicine).

Reformed subjects

In September 2018 all A-level subjects will be reformed and hence examined at the end of the two-year course.

AS qualifications will only be available for mathematics and Spanish, if taken as a long, thin option over two years.

Please just ask if you have anything you do not fully understand – we are always happy to offer advice and support – and a final reminder, choose subjects you will enjoy since you are more likely to be successful in these subjects.

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