

Year 9 Careers Information & Advice: A guide to choosing GCSE options

We are entering the time of year when many year 9 students begin to consider what subjects they wish to take for their GCSE options. It may be that you aren't sure how best to support your child or you may be very informed and confident. Our intention is to offer a gentle guide to support you.

Note: your individual situation may vary slightly, depending on the school your child attends. For example, in some schools option choices are made in year 8 as opposed to year 9 and some GCSE exams are taken a year early in year 10, rather than year 11.

Career Planning

Many students in year 9 make decisions at this time of year with regards what GCSE choices they wish to take in years 10 and 11. These choices will vary significantly from school to school, with some also offering BTEC qualifications alongside GCSEs.

Most students will not have an idea of what they wish to do when they are older and if they do, it is very likely these ideas will change over time and is perfectly 'normal'ⁱ. Having said this, some students may have very clear ideas that won't change over the years (from experience these students are likely to be in the minority).

To help students develop their career ideas many schools are developing their careers education offer in line with nationally recognised standards called the Gatsby Benchmarksⁱⁱ which, include access to independent careers guidance by a fully qualified careers adviser and experiences of the world of work to inspire. Many schools also have a careers library with useful books and resources on their school webpages.

Some of the most useful web tools which, help students explore their ideas include:

- <https://www.startprofile.com/>
- <https://icould.com/>
- <https://www.careersbox.co.uk/>

Many industries also have career quizzes and guides which can help students develop their ideas, including MI5 (do you have what it takes to work in intelligence?) and the CITB with their construction quiz. Your careers adviser in school can help you find these.

Here are a few of our favourite ones:

- <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/careers/ssq>
- <https://www.stepintothenhhs.nhs.uk/careers/take-the-test>
- <https://www.goconstruct.org/learn-about-construction/find-the-role-for-you/ultimate-quiz/>
- <https://careers.bps.org.uk/>

Decision Making

There are many different ways to make decisions but, your child may wish to choose their subjects based on some of these:

- Being good at them and/or enjoying them

Taking subjects you are good at and/or enjoy often means you will gain higher grades in these areas, increasing the range of options available to you at post-16. You may also have a more enjoyable time in school during your studies, thereby having a better quality of life and fewer concerns with regards your mental health due to stress or worry.

- Which build skills you wish to develop

Certain subjects are highly useful in developing transferable skills for the future, often being useful in more than one setting. For example, studying history allows you to learn about historical events but also enables you to develop your analytical, comprehension and essay skills; all of which are desirable in careers requiring these skills such as areas of law and business.

- Which are future proof against automation

Numerous reportsⁱⁱⁱ talk about the affect automation is having on the possible careers we can pursue, with some jobs being replaced by robots and computers. Leading commentators, have discussed the benefits of building skills and abilities in areas which automation will struggle to replace. For example roles involving creativity, empathy and ingenuity.

Useful careers websites such as <http://explore.skillsroute.com/main> , <https://www.nesta.org.uk/quiz/will-robot-take-my-job/> and the BBC's "Will a robot take your job" (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-34066941>) allow students to explore roles facing a greater chance of automation and identify the skills and subjects they may need to circumnavigate this threat.

A counterpoint is that some reports have highlighted that AI and automation may lead us to sharing the world of work with robots, rather than being replaced by them^{iv}.

- As a skill for life

An alternative way to choose subjects, is to consider whether these are things you wish to take with you into life as a broader life skill or for fun.

For example, you may take food technology not because you wish to be a chef but because you wish to be able to cook when you move out of home or live away at university. Perhaps you wish to take Spanish because you wish to travel when older, rather than because you wish to work as a translator or within international business.

- For your mental health

Mental health is increasingly important in our lives, in a world which can seem to be going faster and faster. It maybe that you choose a subject which helps you to destress and decompress.

A variety of articles online, highlight the importance of this aspect within our schools^v. As it is an area of concern for us at CXK, we have developed resources to support individual mental health alongside our emotional wellbeing services:

- <https://www.cxk.org/resources/managing-stress/>
- <https://www.cxk.org/resources/mental-health-spotting-the-signs/>
- <https://www.cxk.org/resources/mindfulness-tips/>
- <https://www.cxk.org/resources/create-your-own-wellbeing-plan/>

- Career Foundation

Lastly, you may choose a subject because it forms the foundation for a career, such as taking art for a career in architecture or VFX design.

I have seen many students take computing or engineering as an option, as they are curious about what is involved and wish to see if it is for them, as an area of work.

Such “trying things out” is useful and key during this period of our children’s lives. Where they figure out the sort of adults they wish to become and the areas of work they wish to pursue. Such exploration takes time and for many, will see their ideas change and develop even as they progress into their late teens and early twenties.

Subject Choices: CAUTION!

It maybe that your son or daughter chooses their GCSE options based on a combination of some or all of the above. However, when choosing subjects, there are certain pitfalls which are worth being aware of or to be cautious of.

- History & Geography

If they are deciding whether or not to take history or geography as a subject, it is worth being aware that if they choose not to take these for GCSE and then decide that they wish to study them for A-Level or IB later, the majority of 6th Forms will have preferred them to already have studied the subject they are wishing to take for GCSE. Very few 6th Forms, will let them take these as A-levels without prior study.

- Arts

If deliberating whether to take any of the art subjects there are two areas of importance to note.

Firstly, we have seen a growth of careers which, require or find useful a prior training in the arts. Traditionally this was within the area of architecture, where a combination of maths and/or physics and art at year 9 kept open the pathways to these A-Levels at post-16 and then later training via an architecture degree or degree apprenticeship. Now, we are seeing a growth in VFX and digital art degrees which look for students to have a skills set in both art and maths.

Choosing to not take art can cause problems later at post 16 & 18 (if there is an interest in these areas).

Secondly, if students don’t pick an art related subject at this time then, if for post-16 they wish to study this to a higher level (without a GCSE as a foundation) many of them will have to study at college at a lower level first.

- Engineering, Food Technology & DT

Similar to the arts, if not taken as a subject choice in year 9, students will need to start their training at a lower level before being able to progress. Although, it is worth noting that if students don’t take this subject for GCSEs, it is still possible to enter this area of study and work, by working through the levels at college or via an apprenticeship during post-16.

- Modern Foreign Language

Arguably, this is the hardest subject to pick up later at post-16 if not taken now, with very few options to do so in mainstream education later on. Partly due to this, MFL forms part of the EBacc^{vi} which, is a performance measure schools are measured by the government on.

EBacc?

For some schools, parents and students the EBacc is a contentious matter. It will depend on the policy in your daughter or son's school whether the EBacc is compulsory for all students or not. If it is, they will have to take English language and literature, maths, sciences and then a choice of geography or history and a language from their option choices. The government feels that these choices help prepare students for a range of different careers and allow them to their options open.

"The EBacc is made up of the subjects which the Russell Group says, at A Level, open more doors to more degrees ... A study by the UCL Institute of Education shows that studying subjects included in the EBacc provides students with greater opportunities in further education and increases the likelihood that a pupil will stay on in full-time education."^{vii}

It may be worth noting, that the Russell Group also offer advice on their website <https://russellgroup.ac.uk/policy/publications/informed-choices/> which maybe of use further down the line when choosing A-Levels for after year 11 (one of many different choices at post-16).

Although, as an approach it isn't without its critics, as some point out that this isn't the only way to consider assessing the worth of options for the future yet, these choices at post-16 do link to choices in year 9 (so worth being aware so as to avoid further potential pitfalls down the line).

BTECs?

In contrast to the EBacc some schools will offer BTECs as part of their option choices. In contrast to traditional GCSEs these offer a different way of learning which, may suit some students as they are predominantly coursework based and in some cases focus on honing practical skills.

Contrary to some opinions, BTECs can open doors in their areas of study; providing a foundation for many options at post-16 including 6th Form, college and apprenticeships. A balanced way to consider the choice between GCSE and BTECs is to consider where your daughter or son may thrive best. If your son or daughter would struggle with exams and achieve a lower grade in this form of study, arguably taking a BTEC may provide them with the tools to gain a higher grade at the end of year 11; thereby keeping open a wider range of options for post-16.

Research

Regardless of which options and approaches resonate the most, doing your research is important. Key for students is not to assume that studies at GCSE will be the same as what they have done so far. Formats can vary as can content so, it is crucial they speak to the subject teachers at their school to find out what a course is like, what is involved, what it will cover, as well as how it is taught.

From experience, the students I see (in my work as a careers adviser) in year 11 who are most disappointed in the option choices they made at year 9 are those who didn't do their research; who assumed that they could tell what a course was like just from its name.

If possible, ask your child to speak to older children in the school who are studying the subjects they are interested in and attend tasters of these subjects in school (if offered).

Many schools will also run open evenings for parents and carers to attend so they can support their children with the decision making. These are well worth attending.

It is easy for us as parents or carers to assume that the subjects we studied at school haven't changed significantly since our school days (they have). Whilst at these events, discuss with subject teachers not just how the subjects are taught and what they cover but also, how much homework will be involved (this is a question which is often overlooked). In addition, familiarise yourself with the current process at your child's school, as it can vary significantly from school to school and even from year to year.

Finally, some words of advice to students, parents and carers alike...

- Choose based on your interests and values, not those of your friends.
- Don't choose a subject based on your like or dislike of a teacher (they may not be there next year and may place your own plans for the future at risk).
- Lastly, give yourself time to stop, think and reflect before making your final decisions.

Summary

All of this may feel a little daunting, but our independent careers advisers as well as our colleagues at the National Careers Service helpline for teenagers: <https://www.gov.uk/careers-helpline-for-teenagers> are here to support you if you have any questions or queries.

Remember, according to some experts many of us won't know what we really want to do until we are closer to our thirties. Our teenage years and twenties are often spent "trying out" and "finding out" about the things we may wish to do or be.

For our children, these years are a series of transitions and transformations, as they begin to fulfil their destinies; for parents and careers this can be somewhat nerve wracking! If you find you or your child need support, please contact us at CXK and we will do what we can to help.

Good luck to everyone choosing their GCSE options!

Written by Chris Targett, Careers Adviser and Area Manager for Information, Advice & Guidance

ⁱ <https://www.careers.govt.nz/resources/career-practice/career-theory-models/supers-theory/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/schools-colleges/understand-gatsby-benchmarks>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/feb/01/robots-take-our-jobs-amazon-go-seattle>
<https://www.knowablemagazine.org/article/technology/2018/future-work-will-robots-take-my-job>

^{iv} <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/feb/11/robots-and-ai-to-give-doctors-more-time-with-patients-says-report>

^v http://theconversation.com/mental-health-crisis-in-teens-is-being-magnified-by-demise-of-creative-subjects-in-school-102383?fbclid=IwAR153mH5mr8AvNhOPPoeCv8WWP_iZAJ6Kflt86SxrhYcEK5Yd120meO-Bb4

^{vi} <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-baccalaureate-ebacc/english-baccalaureate-ebacc>

^{vii} <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-baccalaureate-ebacc/english-baccalaureate-ebacc>