Choosing your GCSE options (or preferences)

What are GCSEs and why do I have options (or preferences)
A GCSE is a General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE). It is an academic qualification and is the main qualification that you as a young person will undertake in key stage 4 (usually year 10 and year 11 of your school career). Several GCSEs are considered compulsory with others being chosen by you as the student within a few guidelines. A GCSE normally takes two years to complete and you take the final exams in Year 11.

Why study for a GCSE?
GCSEs give you a good foundation set of skills and knowledge and are important stepping stones if you want to get a job or continue studying. Many employers and colleges ask for candidates to have at least 5 GCSEs (grade 4 or above), so they will come in useful, whatever you choose to do.

Other Qualification options:
Some schools may also offer additional or alternative qualifications alongside GCSEs, these are likely to be vocational qualifications such as BTECs. A vocational qualification offers you an opportunity to undertake practical learning directly related to a future job role. These can be a good option for those who have a specific job sector in mind or who would like to gain employability skills linked to a specific job area. To find out more about vocational qualifications ask your school what's on offer to you, discuss with your teachers or career practitioner any particular queries you have.

Which GCSEs are compulsory?
The government states that during key stage 4 students are required to work towards several compulsory national qualifications in the following core subjects:

- English, maths and science

What should I consider when picking my preferences (or options)?
There are a range of other subjects that are usually grouped into options (or preferences) you can choose to study alongside core subjects.

Not all schools offer all the non-compulsory subjects, but you are likely to be offered at least one subject from each of these broad groups:

- Arts
- Design and technology
- Humanities
- Modern foreign languages

Some of these courses are practical and hands-on, whereas others are more academic and involve more reading and writing. You should be able to find something to suit your interests.

Most subjects that you can choose will be good general preparation for the world of work or any future learning you undertake.

When considering subjects to choose here are some things to consider to help you to narrow down your decisions:

- It is a subject you enjoy
- It fits with your career ideas and goals
- Your grades in the subject are good

- You are confident this is a subject that you want to study beyond year 11
- It ensures you have a good combination of options after year 11
- Based on your research it fits well with the approach you like to take to learning and will motivate you
- You can develop new skills by doing it in areas of interest or focus for you

You may be tempted to take a subject for other reasons that are less likely to give you a positive outcome for instance:

- You like the teacher – the current teacher may well change
- You think the subject is easy – have you researched what this will look like in year 10/11?
- Your friends have picked this subject
- You haven't really thought about it or done your research
- You think it's a good option for a male or female

Avoid making decisions for these reasons without considering whether you are making a balanced choice. If you find yourself using these reasons ask yourself:

- What might the impact of that choice be?
- What might change after I make that choice?

Seek advice and guidance from your teachers, career practitioner or parents/carers.

Questions to ask yourself

If you are struggling to make a decision, consider asking yourself the following questions:

1. What subjects do I enjoy?

Are there subjects you already do that you really enjoy or find fascinating, where time goes by fast and you are motivated to go to these lessons? It is likely that you will get better grades in a subject that you find engaging.

2. How do I like to learn?

Do you like geography because you are good at researching and collecting and analysing data? Do you like English and drama because you get to talk and listen? Working out how you like to learn can help you choose your subjects.

3. What subjects am I good at?

What do you get your best marks in? There may be some subjects you've never studied before but would do well in. Take a strengths quiz, look at your grades or ask your teachers for advice.

4. What are my skills and personal qualities?

Take a quiz, find out more about you own skills and personal qualities by taking any of the following quizzes:

- A short personality profile that will help you identify your strengths and jobs that could suit you - icould - Buzz Quiz
- See what skills you have - https://careerpilot.org.uk/information/help-and-support/quizzes-that-match-your-skills-and-interests-to-jobs

5. Where could a particular subject take me?

Know what you want to do when you leave school? Picking the right subjects could help you get there. Do some research, look at the career paths or subjects you wish to pursue and any GCSE subjects that might

be useful. If you don't know what you want to do then consider keeping your options open by selecting a balanced set of subjects that show your breadth of knowledge and ability to learn in different ways.

6. Whose advice could I seek out to help me in choosing GCSE options?

- Teachers at your school are well-placed to offer you advice and support; do talk to your teachers if you have any questions about your GCSEs and how it all works.
- Your parents/carers can also help – they may not understand the new point systems and things that weren't around in their day, but they should have your best interests at heart, know you well and be able to help you identify your strengths, skills and qualities.
- Your friends will be going through the same stress as you, so you can bounce ideas off them if you like… but it's important to remember it's **your** final decision.
- Career practitioners – seek out the opportunity to talk to your career practitioner in school who can provide you with information, advice and guidance to help support your decision making.

7. Do the GCSE choices I am making affect my college choices?

Some A-level options don't require you to have studied them at GCSE first – for example, psychology, economics, media studies or law – but for others you'll need the GCSE, so check with your teacher or review the college websites and/or prospectus to help guide you.

8. Do my final GCSE options list look balanced?

This is a helpful question to ask yourself once you've come up with a list of GCSE options you like the look of. Does it look like it's got a good general spread of subjects (so not just art or sport and just tech subjects)? Does it feature 'traditional' subjects (like history, geography or languages) other than your core subjects? These are seen by both universities and employers as very useful subjects to study because they show how hard you can work and teach skills that will be useful in all kinds of further education courses and careers.

When making choices about what to study, focus on your learning. You should aim to construct a programme of study that gives you the best blend of:

Transferable Skills

- do things independently
- know how to find things out
- think creatively
- sort out problems
- organise and manage your own work
- get on with other people and make a good contribution in a team

Transferable Knowledge

- good communication by speaking, listening and writing
- information technology
- report and essay writing
- preparation and delivery of presentations
- research
- data recording
- analysis and interpretation

Keeping your options open

You generally need at least 4 or 5 GCSEs at grade 4 or above to continue with T Levels, A levels or level 3 vocational qualifications at the end of Year 11. Choosing subjects in Year 9 that you are good at will help you work towards gaining 4s or above.

If you already have an idea what you want to go on to study or a focus for your career it may be worth working backwards from any degree/A level/T Level or vocational subject you wish to study and at what university. Review the grades and subjects they require both at college and at school and use this to help inform your choices.

If you are not sure what you want to do after Year 11 don't be concerned; many people are still exploring their options and looking at what is available. Indeed, many careers of the future may not even exist today. You can take reassurance from the fact that the most important subjects such as English, maths and science are core subjects and to keep your options open you could choose facilitating subjects (i.e. subjects that help you keep your options open) such as geography or languages to support a wide set of skills and learning.

Finally, if you are interested in an apprenticeship as an option, check if there are any Year 9 options you can choose to help you develop your skills in support of your chosen apprenticeship pathway.

Useful Websites

There is lots of useful information to help you to make your decisions available online, on the school's website or from other online resources:

- https://nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk/ - Lots of career information including the employment situation for each career in various parts of the UK.
- www.startprofile.com - Look up jobs to find out what they involve and complete your personality profile to find out what job might suit you.
- www.icould.com - Watch short video clips of people talking about the jobs they do.
- https://successatschool.org/ - Useful careers guidance and careers zone focused on different jobs, what to study and how to get there.
- https://futurefinder.yourlife.org.uk/ - Designed to help you identify possible future career paths through discovering links between A level choices, career paths or through matching your personality to jobs.
- https://targetcareers.co.uk/ - A guide to potential career paths, choosing the most appropriate A level subjects and which careers require specific degrees or A levels.
- www.findapprenticeship.service.gov.uk, www.gov.uk/apply-apprenticeship, www.gov.uk/find-traineeship - the Government sponsored website for information on apprenticeships and traineeships Includes a vacancies database and option to apply online.

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