

# Choosing what to study after age 16: Teacher's Notes

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## Lesson Outline

The activities in this lesson are designed to help students **to develop a critical approach to information that they encounter when thinking about subjects to study after the age of 16**. The structure of the lesson is taken from one 'student choice' web site (Studential, at [http://www.studential.com/further\\_education/alevels/choosingyouralevels](http://www.studential.com/further_education/alevels/choosingyouralevels)) which encourages students to think about:

- The subjects they enjoy
- The workload of different subjects
- Their own strengths
- 'Traditional' vs. 'Non-traditional' subjects

**The lesson draws on information relevant to the last two of these points:**

- (i) A leaflet produced by the Russell Group Universities titled 'Informed Choices' and available on the web at <http://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/media/informed-choices/InformedChoices-latest.pdf>. This leaflet includes a section about 'preferred' and 'non-preferred subjects'.
- (ii) A Report by researchers at the University of Durham's Curriculum, Evaluation and Management Centre titled 'Relative Difficulty of Examinations in Different Subjects (2008, p.5). This is available on the web at <http://www.score-education.org/media/3194/relativedifficulty.pdf>

**The lesson format consists of a series of activities. You may wish to organise these as individual, paired or small group activities according to what will work best with this class. You may also punctuate the activities with whole class discussion of students' answers.**

## List of Activities

**Activity 1 To introduce four perspectives (enjoyment, workload, personal strengths and 'traditional vs non-traditional subjects).**

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**You may wish to ask students to read the information and complete tasks 1a-1c before pausing for a brief review of their answers. When this activity was trialled it took students about 10 minutes.**

Task 1a How reliable (how true) are these statements?

Task 1b How important are each of these factors to you when thinking about what to study after age 16? (Put a tick in one of the columns for each row)

Task 1c Which of these statements is closest to what is meant by Voice 4?

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## Activity 2 To evaluate web site reliability in relation to information about so-called 'banned' subjects

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You are advised to ask students to complete Tasks 2a-2c and then to stop whilst you review their answers with them. The notes on Activity 2 provide information about the booklet produced by the Russell Group universities. These notes list the subjects which, according to the Russell Group, are 'facilitating subjects'. There is no absolute 'right' answer to Tasks 2b-2c, but you are encouraged to see the list from the Russell Group as a perspective to discuss. The notes also give you the web address for this booklet. In reviewing these tasks it may be useful to check that students know that the majority of universities do not belong to the 'Russell Group'. This activity took about 15 minutes when the lesson was trialled.

Task 2a The 'Russell Group' of Leading UK universities recently produced a list of sixth form subjects which they refer to as 'facilitating subjects' which will be good to do for a wide range of degree subjects at University.

Task 2b Choose ONE subject which you think would be good to do for a wide range of options at university and explain why you think it would be a 'facilitating subject'.

Task 2c Choose ONE subject which you think would NOT be good to do for a wide range of options at university and explain why you think it would NOT be a 'facilitating subject'. Notes on Activities

Task 2d (Only complete this task once you have reviewed your answers to Task 2a). Now you have this additional information how reliable is Voice 4 in the first task? Could you re-write the statement in Voice 4 so that it is more reliable?

## Activity 3 To review the notion of students' strengths in relation to a comparison of subject difficulty

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This activity took about 25 minutes when the lesson was trialled. You might want to divide it into two parts with a review after Task A. You are advised to use evidence from a report by researchers at the University of Durham in reviewing Task B with students. Some key points from this research are provided in the notes on this Activity. The notes also provide a web address for the report. There is some conflict between the use of the term 'soft' subject in the Russell Group document and the comparison of subject difficulty provided by the researchers from the University of Durham.

Task 3a Another suggestion (Voice 3) on the web site is that you should aim to study your best subjects. How well do you think you know how easy or hard for you each of these subjects would be if you studied them in the sixth form? Decide whether you think each subject would be easy, medium or hard for you and then tick one of the columns to show how sure or unsure you are about your judgement.

Task 3b How hard are each of these subjects for the average sixth form student?

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## Notes on Activities

**Activity 1** To introduce the four perspectives (enjoyment, workload, personal strengths and 'traditional vs non-traditional subjects).

Voice 4 is adapted from the Studential web site. The web site uses the word 'blacklist' which has been replaced in this Activity by the term 'banned' in line with the reporting of a story in the Guardian Friday 20 August 2010(<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/aug/20/a-level-subjects-blacklist-claim>). This change is made to avoid use of the term 'blacklist' which it would be inappropriate to report without encouraging a critical discussion of the term. When trialling this activity some students asked about the meaning of the labels 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' subject. Some exemplification was added in the brackets)

1. Here are some things which a 'student advice' web site (Studential) tells you to think about when choosing what to study between the ages of 16 and 18.

The graphic consists of four speech bubbles arranged on a light gray background. Each bubble contains a numbered point of advice. The first bubble is at the top left, the second is at the top right, the third is at the bottom left, and the fourth is at the bottom right.

- 1 Enjoyment** - it's important to choose subjects you enjoy doing. Even if you are good at a certain subject, you might not actually enjoy it all that much.  
  
There's no point going through sixth form or college and never looking forward to lessons because you don't like them. This in turn may make you feel you can't cope with the work and make you feel stressed in the long-term.
- 2 Workload** – another good reason to read through the syllabuses of each subject you are considering is to check how they are assessed.
- 3 Strengths** - read through the syllabuses for subjects you are considering doing to see whether they play to your strengths. For example, if you excel at creative writing, then an English Language A level would be a better option than English Literature
- 4 'Traditional' (like Mathematics and English) versus 'Non-traditional subjects' (which are not usually taught to students before the sixth form)** – some top universities have recently started banning certain A level subjects. Some subjects are deemed as "soft". These include Dance, Sports Studies, Photography and Accounting.

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Activity 2 To evaluate web site reliability in relation to information about so-called 'banned' subjects

Voice 4 in Activity 1 refers to the Russell Group publication 'Informed Choices'. This publication effectively divides sixth form subjects into three categories

<b>'Hard' Subjects</b>		<b>'Soft' Subjects</b>
<b>Facilitating Subjects</b>	<b>Other Subjects 'providing suitable preparation for University Entry'</b>	<b>Subjects 'with a practical or vocational bias'</b>
"Subjects that are required more often than other subjects"	"Subjects were less often required for entry to an undergraduate degree"	"Students who take one 'soft subject' do not generally experience problems applying to a Russell Group university."
<b>Biology</b>	<b>Economics</b>	<b>Art and Design</b>
<b>Chemistry</b>	<b>Religious Studies</b>	<b>Business Studies</b>
<b>English (Literature)</b>	<b>Welsh</b>	<b>Media Studies</b>
<b>Geography</b>	<b>(amongst others)</b>	<b>Photography</b>
<b>History</b>		<b>(amongst others)</b>
<b>Languages (Ancient and Modern)</b>		
<b>Mathematics and Further Mathematics</b>		

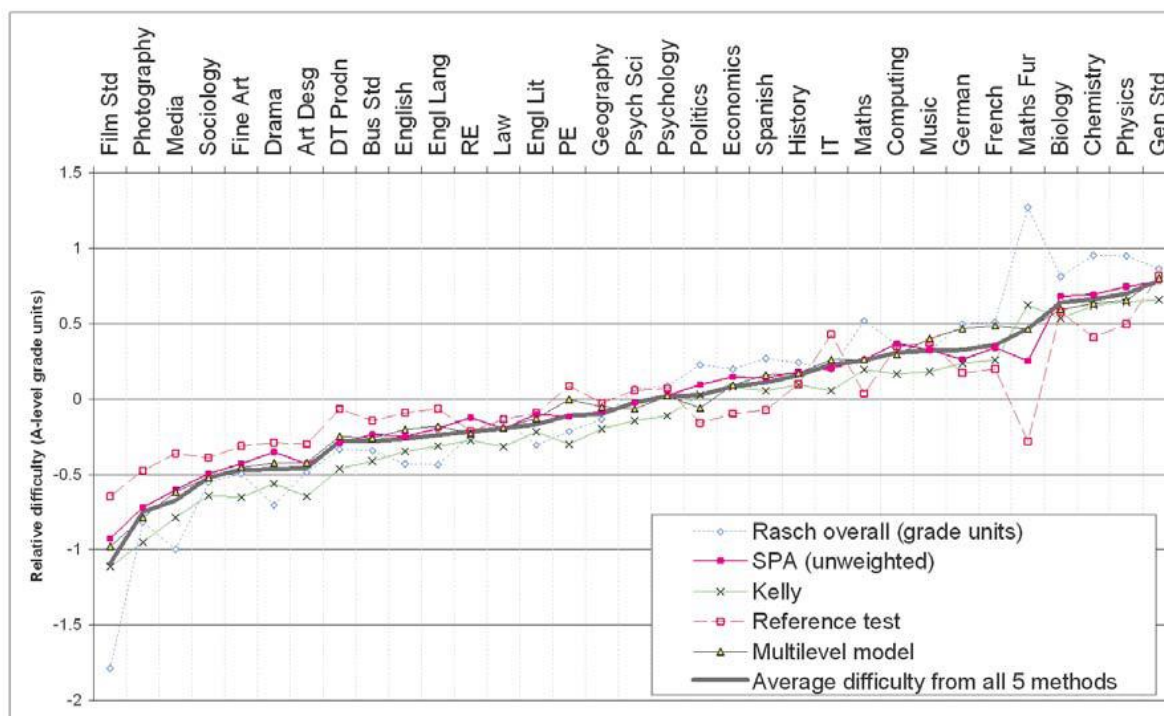
Therefore, the reference to some subjects being banned (or 'blacklisted') is a distortion of the information released by the Russell Group. The booklet advises students to include *no more than one* of the subjects in its 'soft' subjects list. In addition, the booklet refers to some subjects (it lists Economics, Welsh and Religious Studies) which it suggests will be considered as academically equivalent to the subjects in the Facilitating' List.

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## Activity 3 To evaluate the idea of a 'soft' subject referring to evidence provided by the Curriculum, Evaluation and Management Centre at the University of Durham

A Report by researchers at the University of Durham's Curriculum, Evaluation and Management Centre titled 'Relative Difficulty of Examinations in Different Subjects (2008). This is available on the web at <http://www.score-education.org/media/3194/relativedifficulty.pdf>

Page 5 of the report includes a graph comparing several estimates of differences in subject difficulty.



Some points of interest in this Figure are:

- It is not easy to see a clear cut division of 'hard/traditional' and 'easy/non-traditional' in this comparison. For example English and Business Studies are at the same position in terms of level of difficulty and you might not imagine this from the Russell Group document. Likewise Geography and PE appear at about the same position.
- Whilst Maths appears above average difficulty in the comparison it is not that much different from History and Economics.
- According to this information the answers to Task 3b would be

Biology	Hard	French	Hard
Business Studies	Easy	General Studies	Hard
Design and Technology (Production)	Easy	Geography	Medium
Drama	Easy	Mathematics	Medium
Economics	Medium	Physics	Hard
English	Easy	Psychology	Medium