

Collective response to an enquiry regarding the number of A level subjects studied

I write in response to your letter of 2 February 2006, both as an Admissions Tutor and in my capacity as Chairman of the Admissions Forum. Your letter has occasioned a lively discussion amongst Cambridge Admissions Tutors, and I believe that some of my colleagues may already have responded individually. What follows is a distillation of our discussions and represents the collective thinking of Admissions Tutors.

Our general view is that three academic/traditional and relevant subjects at A level are usually quite sufficient to show the width of an applicant's interests and their ability to manage a range of differing complex academic tasks. For Arts and Social Sciences courses, therefore, we are much keener that applicants show broader and deeper knowledge of their chosen subject (or those closest to it if a 'new' subject) rather than accumulating extra A levels. If students have a genuine interest (and can sustain high quality work) in more than three A levels then we, of course, have no objection to them pursuing these – but we are not usually going to require that they do. Some Admissions Tutors feel that students' interests would be better served by taking higher level courses in the chosen application subject (such as AEAs) where their school can support them. Certainly we would expect students taking three subjects in Year 13/Upper Sixth to demonstrate at interview and in their personal statement that they have extended their studies beyond the curriculum.

We are aware that the model of taking three (or four) A levels in Year 13/Upper Sixth, possibly adding a further contrasting AS, is no longer universal. We have previously asked for all three of the usually required A levels to be taken at one sitting, but are now content if an approach tailored to the needs of individual students and their schools means that some A levels are taken early. Offers can be made which take this into account and Colleges will take decisions according to particular cases.

For those who want to apply for mathematical and science subjects we are aware that the academic value of taking four A levels is clearer. We certainly would never wish to put off an applicant offering, say, three sciences plus maths for our science-based courses, and would very actively encourage all applicants in Physical Natural Sciences, Computer Science, Engineering, Chemical Engineering and Mathematics to take Further Maths if available (and, if not, to see how else they might improve and develop their mathematical knowledge and skills according to the advice offered on both the University of Cambridge Engineering and Mathematics Faculties' websites). At some schools this may involve taking AS Further Maths even when the full A level cannot be resourced. Further Maths is also of real value for Economists.

Further Maths is thus a particular case which should be considered separately from others. In many ways it is effectively not a fourth, distinct A level, but grows out of work done for A level Maths. The combination of Maths and Further Maths is not, for those strong in the subject, as heavy a burden as combinations of Maths with any other A level. In addition, many applicants have effectively completed A level Maths by the end of Year 12/Lower Sixth. Where schools cannot provide more, we accept the thinner diet of Maths, Further Maths and Physics as a possible A2 combination, but with reservations. It is not an ideal preparation for Physical Natural Sciences, given the breadth of the Tripos. We would expect students taking only those three A levels to be broadening or deepening their studies in some way, in the case of Maths applicants, this might mean preparing for STEP. Many Engineers, as well as Natural Scientists, would argue the same – certainly budding Chemical Engineers must have Chemistry – and the breadth of the Engineering Tripos means that there several other A levels (Electronics, the more academic varieties of Design Technology, Computer Science) that would better prepare a student than just a diet of Maths, Further Maths and Physics. In the Biological Sciences, a pattern of four science A levels including Maths, but not necessarily Further Maths, could also be considered a good preparation for our courses.

I hope that this response clarifies the situation for you.

Yours sincerely, and on behalf of the Admissions Tutors of the Cambridge Colleges,

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