

# The hard truth about 'soft' subjects

## Improving transparency about the implications of A-level subject choice

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Pupils may be unknowingly ruining their chances of getting into a leading research university by choosing so-called 'soft' A-level subjects, including [Law](#), [Media Studies](#) and [Psychology](#). This research note shines a much-needed spotlight on an admissions process that is complicated and often misleading. We show for the first time that the vast majority of research-intensive universities are admitting fewer 'soft' A-levels and more traditional A-levels in comparison with the national uptake of these subjects in schools.

Yet currently only Cambridge University and the London School of Economics publish lists of 'non-preferred' subjects. Other universities do not publish lists and many offer no clear advice about subjects that may count against a student on their websites. We feel strongly that universities have the right to make their own decisions about whether a subject provides the right preparation for a particular course or not. But this lack of transparency is unacceptable.

The current situation has serious implications for the vital agenda to widen access to universities. Non-selective state school students are far more likely to take non-traditional A-levels than Independent and Grammar school students: many of these subjects are not even offered at most Independent and Grammar schools. Many schools are misleading pupils and parents by failing to offer adequate advice about higher education or the implications of choosing particular subjects. Thus subject choice has become yet another hurdle that may prevent students from less-advantaged families achieving their full academic potential.

### The hard truth: a snapshot

- At Oxford University more students were accepted in 2007-08 with [Further Mathematics](#) A-level (711) than [Accounting, Art & Design, Business Studies, Communication Studies, Design & Technology, Drama/Theatre Studies, Film Studies, Home Economics, ICT, Law, Media Studies, Music Technology, Psychology, Sociology, Sports Studies/Physical Education](#) and [Travel & Tourism](#) A-level combined (overall 494 of these subjects were accepted).
- [Biology, Chemistry, Further Mathematics, Mathematics](#) and [Physics](#) comprised close to half of all accepted A-levels for Bristol University (49.8%) and University College London (46.9%).
- 75% of all A-level examinations are taken in non-selective state schools but 96% of [Law](#) and 93% of [Media Studies](#) A-level entries are in these schools.

### Our recommendations

- **All research-intensive universities must take immediate action to improve transparency on non-preferred subjects.** Each university should give clear guidance on the first page of the admissions section of their website, stating that they consider certain subjects less effective preparation for certain courses. They should provide a full list of these subjects, following the example of LSE and Cambridge.
- **The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) should take a lead on improving transparency about subject preference via their website.** They should urge universities to be clear about any non-preferred subjects in explicit terms in their entry profiles. As part of this UCAS must work to make it easier for university admissions tutors to update their information.
- **We fully endorse the Sutton Trust's recommendation that all secondary schools should give clear responsibility to an existing teacher to lead on careers and education guidance.** This teacher should be expected to undertake regular training to keep this knowledge up to date.

## Introduction

The question of what A-levels you really need to get into a top university in Britain is one that has been pushed under the carpet for too long. This research note aims to shine a much-needed spotlight on a complicated and often misleading admissions process, making the implications of subject choice clearer for teachers, pupils, parents and policy makers. **As a parent, would you be confident that you could steer your child in the right direction when it comes to the right subject choice to get into a particular university?** Perhaps you might guess that **Drama** or **Tourism** would not be at the top of many admissions tutors' wish lists, but what about **Law** or **Business Studies**?

For some time now there has been a suspicion that many schools – and particularly many state schools – might be nudging students towards newer, 'softer' A-level subjects. The little research that has been done on 'soft' subjects has centred upon the question of whether they exist at all. **We do not intend to pass judgement here on whether **Media Studies** or **Psychology** are valuable subjects or not – though we will unpick the reasons why universities might reject a subject as inadequate preparation for higher education.**

The much bigger issue is the extent to which pupils who choose badly are inadvertently slamming shut the door to some of the top research-intensive universities in Britain. We also explore whether subject choice is steered by the type of school you attend.

**Currently only Cambridge University and the London School of Economics publish lists of subjects that they regard as 'non-preferred'.** They should be applauded for this openness. Other universities do not publish lists and many offer no clear advice on their websites about subjects that may count against a student. One might reasonably assume, therefore, that they have no prejudices against particular subjects. But is this the case in practice?

In order to fully understand the implications of choosing subjects badly, one needs to appreciate the odds that students are up against. The number of people entering higher education has risen dramatically in the past 40 years. In 1965 there were **169,500** full-time UK undergraduate students: now there are **1,071,545**.<sup>1</sup> The rapid growth in student applications, coupled with grade inflation at GCSE and A-level, has resulted in leading universities facing an increasing demand for places. Competition for entry to many research-intensive universities is particularly fierce. At Bristol University, for example, there is an average of **12** applicants for every place (rising to **40** for Drama places).<sup>2</sup> At Oxford University this year **15,000** applicants fought for **3,000** places.<sup>3</sup> In such an environment subject choice can be crucial.

University admissions have long been a hot topic, and scrutiny has intensified considerably as the important mission to widen access to higher education has gathered political steam. In the last decade there have been five major reviews of the admissions process. These have produced some useful recommendations, such as a move for greater consistency in the information universities provide about entry qualifications for different courses. **But not enough attention has been paid to subject choice.**

It should be noted that generally universities are working hard at reaching out to non-traditional learners. Ministers are quick to pin the blame for the failure of their high profile widening access agenda on universities. Yet in reality the problem starts years before children are able to apply to university. **It is a shocking failure that only 61% of children currently achieve five GCSEs grade A\*- C<sup>4</sup> – the basic requirement for applying to university.**

We undertook this study with the firm belief that universities have the right to make their own decisions about whether a subject provides the right preparation for a particular course or not – providing they are clear about it in public. **The decision about whether to admit an applicant is one of the key areas in which universities can exercise autonomy.** Yet in this report we will look at how universities can aid the mission to widen access – and help parents, pupils and teachers – by improving transparency about the real implications of subject choice. And while we would certainly not advocate any further interference by government in the admissions process, **it is important that ministers give a strong signal that they see more openness about subject preferences as critical.**

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1. Higher education in facts and figures - Summer 2008, Universities UK, September 2008, <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Bookshop/Documents/Stats2008.pdf> 2. Pupils feel three A-levels no longer enough for university, The Times, 15<sup>th</sup> August 2008, [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life\\_and\\_style/education/article4535630.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/education/article4535630.ece) 3. More students apply to Oxford and Cambridge, The Guardian, 28<sup>th</sup> October 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2008/oct/28/oxford-cambridge-applications> 4. GCSE and Equivalent Results in England 2007/08 (Provisional), Department for Children, Schools and Families, 16<sup>th</sup> October 2008, [http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000815/SFR282008\\_Final.pdf](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000815/SFR282008_Final.pdf)

### Methodology

Using the Freedom of Information Act we wrote to 17 universities from the Russell Group of major research-intensive universities and 17 universities from the 1994 Group of smaller research-intensive universities.<sup>5</sup> We asked these universities to provide us with data on A-levels taken by the full-time UK undergraduate applicants that they accepted for the academic year 2007-08. In total we received full responses from 13 Russell Group universities and 14 1994 Group universities, giving us an overall picture of admissions at 27 leading research-intensive universities. Seven universities failed to give us any data.<sup>6</sup> In this report when we refer to research-intensive universities we are referring to the data from these 27 universities.

We also conducted telephone interviews with 11 heads of admissions from these universities in order to understand the process of admissions better. We offered these individuals anonymity in order to ensure a frank discussion.

Finally, we examined statistics from the Department for Children, Schools and Families detailing A-level subjects offered by type of school in 2004-05 and 2006-07.<sup>7</sup>

## What are the implications of subject choice?

Cambridge and LSE publish lists of non-preferred subjects. Both universities list the following as less effective preparation for university: **Accounting, Art and Design, Business Studies, Communication Studies, Design and Technology, Drama and Theatre Studies, Home Economics, Information and Communication Technology, Media Studies, Music Technology, Sports Studies** and **Travel and Tourism**. In addition LSE singles out **Law** (but Cambridge does not) and Cambridge lists: **Dance, Film Studies, Health and Social Care, Leisure Studies, Performance Studies, Performing Arts, Photography** and **Physical Education**.<sup>8,9</sup>

**None of the other research-intensive universities publish an overall list of non-preferred subjects.** However, our data on A-levels accepted in 2007-08 shows that **the vast majority of research-intensive universities admit fewer 'soft' A-levels and more traditional A-levels in comparison with the national uptake of these subjects in schools.** In some universities, including Oxford, Imperial College London, University College London, Bristol, Durham University and St Andrews University, the difference in uptake of 'soft' and traditional subjects is very significant. **The majority of heads of admissions we spoke to confirmed that some subjects were not considered adequate preparation by their university or by particular departments.**

Cambridge and LSE stress that they are not ruling out these subjects completely. They say that studying one of these subjects will be acceptable only in combination with two other traditional subjects. It is clear from our discussions with heads of admissions that this is the standard approach with non-preferred subjects across the research-intensive universities. However, if a course is inundated with strong applications from students with a straight set of traditional A-levels one must wonder whether a student with one non-preferred A-level will be narrowing their odds of acceptance.

**Without clear advice from universities pupils and parents are left to play a guessing game about which subjects might give an advantage when it comes to applying to a leading university.** It has long been accepted that **General Studies** is often not preferred by universities and should be regarded as more of an 'add-on' to other A-levels. Some of the 'softer' arts A-levels, such as **Media Studies** and **Music Technology**, may be easy to pinpoint as less traditional. However, the new 'professional' A-levels are more confusing. It seems particularly unfair to expect pupils or parents to instinctively know that **Law, Accounting** and **Business Studies** may be considered 'soft' or less desirable by many top universities.

5. The **Russell Group** contains Birmingham University, Bristol University, Cambridge University, Cardiff University, Edinburgh University, Glasgow University, Imperial College London, King's College London, Leeds University, Liverpool University, London School of Economics, Manchester University, Newcastle University, Nottingham University, Queen's University Belfast, Oxford University, Sheffield University, Southampton University, University College London, Warwick University. The **1994 Group** contains Bath University, Birkbeck University, Durham University, East Anglia University, Essex University, Exeter University, Goldsmiths University, Royal Holloway University, Lancaster University, Leicester University, Loughborough University, Queen Mary University, Reading University, St Andrews University, School of Oriental and African Studies, Surrey University, Sussex University, York University 6. These include East Anglia University, Edinburgh University, King's College London, Lancaster University, Leeds University, Newcastle University, Southampton University 7. Achievement and Attainment Tables, Data Services Group, Department for Children, Schools and Families 8. Course requirements, Cambridge University, <http://www.cam.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/requirements/#course> 9. How to apply: A level subjects, London School of Economics, <http://www.lse.ac.uk/resources/undergraduateProspectus2009/howToApply.htm#generated-subheading5>

## The hard truth: a snapshot

- At Oxford, more students were accepted in 2007-08 with **Further Mathematics** A-level (**711**) than **Accounting, Art & Design, Business Studies, Communication Studies, Design & Technology, Drama/Theatre Studies, Film Studies, Home Economics, ICT, Law, Media Studies, Music Technology, Psychology, Sociology, Sports Studies/Physical Education** and **Travel & Tourism** A-level combined (overall **494** of these subjects were accepted).
- **Biology, Chemistry, Further Mathematics, Mathematics** and **Physics** comprised close to half of all accepted A-levels for Bristol (**49.8%**) and UCL (**46.9%**).
- More than three times as many **Economics** A-levels (**640**) were accepted at Nottingham University than **Sociology** (**193**) or **Drama/Theatre Studies** (**165**). These two subjects are both more popular than Economics at A-level in schools.
- More than four times as many A-levels were accepted in **French** at Warwick University (**331**) as in **Law** (**82**). Law is more popular than French at A-level in schools.
- More than four times as many A-levels were accepted in **Physics** at Manchester University (**1875**) than in **Media** and **Film Studies** combined (**403**).
- More A-levels were accepted in **Latin** (**272**) at Oxford than **Business Studies, Law, Psychology** and **Sociology** combined (**214**).

Table 1 shows an analysis of a selection of popular A-level subjects from different subject groups at a cross section of universities from both the Russell Group and 1994 Group . See the following page for a summary of key findings and an explanation of which subjects are included in the subject groups listed below.

	'Soft' arts (%)	'Soft' 'professional' (%)	Sociology & Psychology (%)	Traditional maths and science (%)	Traditional arts (%)
<b>School uptake<sup>11</sup></b>	<b>10.6</b>	<b>6.4</b>	<b>10.2</b>	<b>23.1</b>	<b>13.1</b>
Bath	3.5	3.6	4.7	46.0	14.2
Bristol	3.1	1.7	3.0	49.8	16.9
Cardiff	5.5	4.5	7.7	35.1	16.2
Durham	2.9	2.7	4.6	35.6	21.0
Exeter	5.5	4.6	7.3	24.9	24.5
Imperial	1.0	0.3	0.7	78.1	6.3
Manchester	4.8	5.2	6.3	35.8	15.4
Oxford	1.8	0.7	1.2	43.6	20.5
St Andrews	3.8	1.5	2.9	31.6	22.7
UCL	4.6	1.1	4.0	46.9	18.2
York	3.9	2.6	6.6	32.5	18.4
Research-intensive unis (all 27)	5.2	4.3	6.7	35.3	16.6

**Notes:**

Full-time UK undergraduate admissions for the 2007-2008 academic year.

School uptake by 16-18 year old students in 2006-2007.

10. Data for 27 research-intensive universities obtained from Freedom of Information requests 11. Achievement and Attainment Tables, Data Services Group, Department for Children, Schools and Families

## Table 1: summary of key findings

### 'Soft' arts and humanities based subjects

- In this table we examined the following popular 'soft' arts subjects: **Art and Design, Drama Studies, Film Studies, Media Studies**. Together these subjects make up **10.6%** of all A-levels taken by 16-18 year olds at school.
- However, at research-intensive universities these subjects comprised an average of **5.2%** of A-levels accepted, with **93% of all research-intensive universities falling below the 10.6% average uptake for schools**.
- **Uptake of these subjects combined was particularly low for Oxford (1.8%), Durham (2.9%) and Bristol (3.1%).**

### 'Soft' 'professional' subjects

- We examined the following popular 'soft' subjects with a strong vocational or business element: **Accounting, Business Studies, Law**. These subjects are particularly interesting because one could argue that their business element makes them appear more traditional or 'serious'. Thus parents and pupils may be less likely to question whether universities would favour them. Together these subjects comprise **6.4%** of all A-levels studied by 16-18 year olds at school.
- However, at research-intensive universities these subjects comprised an average of **4.3%** of A-levels accepted, with **89% of all research-intensive universities falling below the 6.4% average uptake for schools**.
- **Uptake was particularly low for Oxford (0.7%), UCL (1.1%) and St Andrews (1.5%).**

### Sociology and Psychology

- Although they do not appear on the Cambridge or LSE non-preferred subject lists, we looked at **Sociology** and **Psychology** because they are now so popular (**Psychology** is now the third most popular A-level excluding General Studies), and because they remain the subject of considerable debate about their academic rigour. Together these subjects comprise **10.2%** of all A-levels studied by 16-18 year olds at school.
- However, at research-intensive universities these subjects comprised an average of **6.7%** of A-levels accepted, with **81% of all research-intensive universities falling below the 10.2% average uptake for schools**.
- **Uptake was particularly low for Imperial (0.7%), Oxford (1.2%) and St Andrews (2.9%).**

### Traditional science and mathematics subjects

- We examined the following popular traditional science and mathematics subjects: **Biology, Chemistry, Further Mathematics, Mathematics, Physics**. Together these subjects comprise **23.1%** of all A-levels studied by 16-18 year-olds at school.
- However, at research-intensive universities these subjects comprised an average of **35.3%** of A-levels accepted, with **81% of all research-intensive universities rising above the 23.1% average uptake for schools**.
- **These five subjects comprised close to half of all accepted A-levels for Bristol (49.8%) and UCL (46.9%). For Imperial, these five subjects comprised nearly four-fifths (78.1%) of all accepted A-levels.**

### Traditional arts and humanities subjects

- We examined the following popular traditional arts and humanities subjects: **Economics, French, Geography, History**. Together these subjects comprise **13.1%** of all A-levels studied by 16-18 year olds at school.
- However, at research-intensive universities these subjects comprised an average of **16.6%** of A-levels accepted, with **81% of all research-intensive universities rising above the 13.1% average uptake for schools**.
- **Uptake was particularly high for Exeter University (24.5%), St Andrews (22.7%) and Durham (21%).**

**Table 2 Accepted A-levels for a selection of traditional and non-traditional subjects at Russell Group universities<sup>12</sup>**

	Art & Design		Business Studies		Chemistry		Drama		Economics		French		Further Maths		History		Law		Maths		Media & Film*		Psychology		Total A-levels	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
<b>National A-levels<sup>13</sup> ('000)</b>	<b>37.9</b>	<b>5.3%</b>	<b>29.2</b>	<b>4.1%</b>	<b>35.1</b>	<b>4.9%</b>	<b>14.9</b>	<b>2.1%</b>	<b>13.9</b>	<b>1.9%</b>	<b>12.1</b>	<b>1.7%</b>	<b>7.2</b>	<b>1.0%</b>	<b>40.5</b>	<b>5.6%</b>	<b>13.8</b>	<b>1.9%</b>	<b>53.3</b>	<b>7.4%</b>	<b>23.3</b>	<b>3.2%</b>	<b>48.6</b>	<b>6.8%</b>	<b>718.8</b>	
Birmingham	275	1.9%	388	2.7%	1,117	7.8%	231	1.6%	355	2.5%	387	2.7%	119	0.8%	1,034	7.2%	169	1.2%	1,275	8.9%	176	1.2%	842	5.8%	14,394	
Bristol	201	1.8%	108	1.0%	1,304	11.5%	107	0.9%	350	3.1%	414	3.6%	370	3.3%	674	5.9%	62	0.5%	1,845	16.2%	48	0.4%	243	2.1%	11,362	
Cardiff	1,966	2.5%	2,091	2.7%	6,984	8.9%	1,023	1.3%	1,395	1.8%	2,189	2.8%	577	0.7%	5,208	6.7%	1,226	1.6%	7,707	9.8%	1,313	1.7%	4,240	5.4%	78,279	
Imperial	45	0.8%	12	0.2%	966	18.2%	7	0.1%	96	1.8%	81	1.5%	410	7.7%	64	1.2%	3	0.1%	1,241	23.4%	3	0.1%	37	0.7%	5,308	
Liverpool	213	2.0%	318	3.0%	956	9.1%	91	0.9%	135	1.3%	241	2.3%	59	0.6%	713	6.8%	204	1.9%	911	8.7%	144	1.4%	567	5.4%	10,510	
Manchester	855	2.4%	1,143	3.2%	3,015	8.5%	431	1.2%	1,155	3.3%	885	2.5%	567	1.6%	2,194	6.2%	449	1.3%	4,271	12.1%	403	1.1%	1,534	4.3%	35,361	
Nottingham	383	2.4%	473	2.9%	1,420	8.8%	165	1.0%	640	4.0%	475	3.0%	221	1.4%	1,198	7.4%	123	0.8%	2,039	12.7%	122	0.8%	584	3.6%	16,084	
Oxford	121	1.1%	27	0.2%	1,003	8.9%	70	0.6%	443	3.9%	585	5.2%	711	6.3%	1,004	8.9%	47	0.4%	1,699	15.1%	16	0.1%	110	1.0%	11,248	
QUB	238	2.3%	370	3.5%	856	8.2%	140	1.3%	143	1.4%	221	2.1%	58	0.6%	853	8.2%	6	0.1%	1,118	10.7%	102	1.0%	106	1.0%	10,466	
Sheffield	341	2.4%	369	2.6%	1,035	7.3%	140	1.0%	329	2.3%	347	2.4%	154	1.1%	1,035	7.3%	217	1.5%	1,488	10.5%	159	1.1%	704	4.9%	14,228	
St Andrews	82	2.6%	30	1.0%	245	7.8%	32	1.0%	62	2.0%	172	5.5%	40	1.3%	316	10.0%	12	0.4%	292	9.3%	5	0.2%	75	2.4%	3,153	
UCL	250	3.5%	51	0.7%	868	12.0%	52	0.7%	301	4.2%	289	4.0%	170	2.4%	497	6.9%	23	0.3%	1,093	15.1%	33	0.5%	228	3.2%	7,228	
Wanwick	181	2.0%	185	2.0%	585	6.5%	121	1.3%	387	4.3%	331	3.7%	515	5.7%	643	7.1%	82	0.9%	1,400	15.5%	74	0.8%	291	3.2%	9,059	

Notes:

# refers to the number of individual A-level subjects accepted for full-time UK undergraduate admissions for the 2007-08 academic year.

% refers to the percentage of individual A-level subjects accepted as a proportion of all A-levels accepted for full-time UK undergraduate admissions for the 2007-08 academic year

\* National A-levels' refers to the national uptake of A-level subjects in schools.

\* The DCSF does not provide individual data for Media Studies - the national A-level figures relate to Media/Film/Television Studies

12. Data for 27 research-intensive universities obtained from Freedom of Information requests 13. Achievement and Attainment Tables, Data Services Group, Department for Children, Schools and Families

**Table 3 Accepted A-levels for a selection of traditional and non-traditional subjects at 1994 Group universities<sup>14</sup>**

	Art & Design		Business Studies		Chemistry		Drama		Economics		French		Further Maths		History		Law		Maths		Media & Film*		Psychology		Total A-levels	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
<b>National A-levels<sup>15</sup> ('000)</b>	<b>37.9</b>	<b>5.3%</b>	<b>29.2</b>	<b>4.1%</b>	<b>35.1</b>	<b>4.9%</b>	<b>14.9</b>	<b>2.1%</b>	<b>13.9</b>	<b>1.9%</b>	<b>12.1</b>	<b>1.7%</b>	<b>7.2</b>	<b>1.0%</b>	<b>40.5</b>	<b>5.6%</b>	<b>13.8</b>	<b>1.9%</b>	<b>53.3</b>	<b>7.4%</b>	<b>23.3</b>	<b>3.2%</b>	<b>48.6</b>	<b>6.8%</b>	<b>718.8</b>	
Bath	317	2.5%	364	2.9%	1,210	9.7%	61	0.5%	416	3.3%	397	3.2%	449	3.6%	497	4.0%	60	0.5%	1,924	15.4%	53	0.4%	427	3.4%	12,463	
Durham	182	1.7%	193	1.8%	768	7.2%	90	0.8%	331	3.1%	378	3.5%	333	3.1%	899	8.4%	85	0.8%	1,296	12.1%	38	0.4%	354	3.3%	10,667	
Essex	71	1.5%	227	4.9%	134	2.9%	105	2.3%	212	4.6%	58	1.3%	48	1.0%	325	7.0%	144	3.1%	337	7.3%	122	2.6%	344	7.4%	4,639	
Exeter	82	0.9%	276	3.1%	362	4.1%	247	2.8%	253	2.9%	330	3.8%	80	0.9%	892	10.2%	113	1.3%	775	8.8%	151	1.7%	486	5.5%	8,781	
Goldsmiths	436	7.6%	117	2.0%	44	0.8%	259	4.5%	74	1.3%	98	1.7%	1	0.0%	460	8.0%	80	1.4%	98	1.7%	400	7.0%	443	7.7%	5,750	
Leicester	91	1.5%	218	3.7%	463	7.8%	74	1.2%	148	2.5%	93	1.6%	28	0.5%	464	7.8%	134	2.3%	500	8.4%	106	1.8%	462	7.8%	5,933	
Loughborough	375	4.1%	490	5.3%	438	4.7%	114	1.2%	319	3.5%	92	1.0%	163	1.8%	298	3.2%	84	0.9%	1,320	14.3%	136	1.5%	444	4.8%	9,232	
Queen Mary	118	1.5%	322	4.2%	893	11.6%	125	1.6%	260	3.4%	143	1.9%	51	0.7%	438	5.7%	115	1.5%	956	12.4%	174	2.3%	369	4.8%	7,714	
Reading	312	3.7%	353	4.2%	443	5.3%	163	1.9%	253	3.0%	178	2.1%	56	0.7%	671	8.0%	137	1.6%	668	8.0%	159	1.9%	459	5.5%	8,372	
Royal Holloway	173	2.9%	189	3.2%	236	4.0%	216	3.6%	198	3.3%	239	4.0%	88	1.5%	501	8.4%	52	0.9%	503	8.5%	160	2.7%	331	5.6%	5,942	
SOAS	37	3.7%	22	2.2%	17	1.7%	15	1.5%	51	5.2%	46	4.7%	6	0.6%	128	13.0%	16	1.6%	54	5.5%	23	2.3%	44	4.5%	988	
Surrey	90	1.9%	288	6.2%	289	6.2%	52	1.1%	122	2.6%	53	1.1%	53	1.1%	201	4.3%	119	2.6%	525	11.3%	130	2.8%	353	7.6%	4,645	
Sussex	283	4.7%	113	1.9%	189	3.1%	186	3.1%	118	1.9%	138	2.3%	32	0.5%	574	9.5%	103	1.7%	302	5.0%	312	5.1%	466	7.7%	6,073	
York	142	2.0%	111	1.6%	483	6.8%	80	1.1%	265	3.7%	157	2.2%	160	2.2%	665	9.3%	60	0.8%	857	12.0%	57	0.8%	312	4.4%	7,139	

Notes:  
 # refers to the number of individual A-level subjects accepted for full-time UK undergraduate admissions for the 2007-08 academic year.  
 % refers to the percentage of individual A-level subjects accepted as a proportion of all A-levels accepted for full-time UK undergraduate admissions for the 2007-08 academic year.  
 \* 'National A-levels' refers to the national uptake of A-level subjects in schools.  
 \* The DCSF does not provide individual data for Media Studies - the national A-level figures relate to Media/Film/Television Studies

14. Data for 27 research-intensive universities obtained from Freedom of Information requests 15. Achievement and Attainment Tables, Data Services Group, Department for Children, Schools and Families

## Why do universities reject certain subjects?

The Government has long been emphatic that there is no such thing as a 'soft' option at A-level. In November 2008 a spokesperson for the Department for Children, Schools and Families said: "We simply don't recognise the label 'soft' or 'hard' subjects - all subjects are rigorously measured against each other to maintain standards."<sup>16</sup> The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) has conducted four studies in the last four years, which have found "little evidence" that A-level subjects described as 'soft' were any less demanding than their counterparts.<sup>17</sup> Yet they have found inconsistencies. For instance, while **Sociology** had a complex theoretical element a 'lenient' marking scheme meant candidates could get by on common sense alone.

Other academic studies have gone much further. **A recent analysis of the A-level results of 250,000 students by Durham University, commissioned by the Royal Society, found that a pupil would be likely to get a pass two grades higher in 'softer' subjects such as **General Studies** or **Business Studies**, than in **Mathematics** or **science**.**<sup>18</sup>

Critically though, our research suggested that many research-intensive universities do not regard the issue of whether certain subjects are easier to get high grades in as the crucial issue. Their subject preferences are generally based on a more nuanced understanding of the skills that a student will need to cope with – or excel in – a particular course. **Factors include whether a subject encourages independent thought, whether its content is academic or practical, the level of internal and external examinations, and the amount of group work involved.** As one head of admissions from a Russell Group university explained: "Past experience is built in where possible. We don't want to pursue students who will drop out or fail. We have the luxury to choose."

Such decisions are not taken lightly. The same head of admissions went on to say: "We have a qualifications officer whose full-time job is to do in-depth analysis of pre-entry qualifications. Their whole job involves unpicking qualifications and consulting academic tutors. We take it very seriously."

We feel strongly that individual universities have the right to make their own decisions about whether a subject provides the right preparation for a particular course or not – as long as they are clear about it.

### Case study: what do research-intensive universities think of Law A-level?

**Law** A-level is a striking example of a potentially 'soft' subject that might fox parents and students as it sounds impressive and 'professional'. LSE highlights Law as a non-preferred subject but most others fail to comment upon it in their admissions guidance. However, our data shows that many research-intensive universities admit relatively low numbers of students with Law A-level, suggesting that they do in fact regard it as a non-preferred subject. **Of all A-levels accepted, Law comprised very few entries at Imperial (3), Queen's University Belfast (6), St Andrews (12), UCL (23), Oxford (47) and Bristol (62).**

When it comes to reading Law at university, Law A-level often seems to be regarded with something less than enthusiasm. One admissions head explained this, saying: "They want a blank canvas. A little knowledge can be a dangerous thing." Another said that objections to the A-level were generally not based upon its content, but on "a general scepticism for non-traditional subjects".

- The Law department website at Queen's University does not mention the suitability of Law A-level. However, for undergraduate Law admissions at Queen's University, **2** out of a total of **738** A-level entries were taken in Law A-level.
- The admissions page of the Faculty of Laws at UCL states "there is no necessity" for taking Law A-level but does not rule it out as non-preferred subject. However, for undergraduate Law admissions at UCL, **6** out of a total of **242** A-level entries were taken in Law A-level.
- Durham Law School states on its FAQ page "we welcome applications from students studying A-level Law." However, for undergraduate Law admissions at Durham, **18** out of a total of **527** A-level entries were taken in Law A-level.

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<sup>16</sup>. Rise of 'soft' subjects stops pupils getting university places, Tories claim, The Telegraph, 18th November 2008, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/3479464/Rise-of-soft-subjects-stops-pupils-getting-university-places-Tories-claim.html> <sup>17</sup>. For a helpful discussion see Soft A-levels? Now that's a hard one, TES, 22nd February 2008, <http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=2583898> <sup>18</sup>. Relative difficulty of examinations in different subjects, CEM Durham University, July 2008, <http://www.cemcentre.org/score2008report.pdf>

Yet, highlighting what a difficult job teachers, pupils and parents will inevitably have understanding what universities want, there is some disparity across the sector about Law. We have already noted that Cambridge does not include the subject on its non-preferred list. Other Law departments are admitting much higher numbers of students with Law A-level than those listed above. For example, at Surrey University 74 applicants with Law A-level were admitted to study Law out of a total of 474 A-levels accepted (if we assume each student took an average of four A-levels, this equates to about 60% of the total students admitted).

Other Law departments have moved to accept Law A-level over time. One head of admissions explained that while his university now accepted Law A-level, **“this hasn’t always been the case...there was a time where we didn’t, probably more than six years ago now”**. And another noted: **“[We are now] using what we know about how successful students with non-traditional subjects are in the programme.”**

Finally, there is also a suggestion that game-playing is taking place within some universities. A head of admissions admitted: **“It’s very important to all Law Schools what ranking they have on the league tables. League tables take into account average A-level grades of accepted students, so with the ranking of Law Schools there is now a big incentive to admit the best A-level grades, and not necessarily the best combination of A-levels.”**

## How does type of school impact on subject choice?

**It is clear from our research that type of school plays a big role in subject choice.** This obviously has serious implications for the vital agenda to widen access to universities. Subject choice has become yet another hurdle that may prevent students from less-advantaged families achieving their full academic potential.

**Non-selective state school students\* are far more likely to take non-traditional A-levels than students from Independent and Grammar schools.** For example, 75% of all A-level examinations are taken in non-selective schools, but 96% of Law and 93% of media studies\*\* A-level entries are in these schools.

**Conversely, Independent school students are far less likely to take non-traditional A-levels.** For example, 15% of all A-level examinations are taken in Independent schools, but only 2% of Sociology and 6% of Psychology A-level entries are in these schools.

Furthermore, Independent and Grammar school students are far more likely to take traditional subjects such as mathematics and science. For example, more than 22% of Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics A-level entries are in Independent schools compared to 15% of entries on average across subjects. This figure is even higher (35%) for Further Mathematics.<sup>19</sup> As we have seen this would put students at a potential advantage at universities that favour traditional science subjects, such as Imperial, UCL and Oxford.

**This is not just an issue of student choice: it is about which subjects schools choose to offer.** Part of the reason why students are more or less likely to choose non-traditional A-level subjects is the availability of those subjects at the school they attend. Non-selective state schools are far more likely to offer non-traditional A-levels than Independent and Grammar schools. For example, non-selective state schools account for 73% of the market share of all schools offering A-levels, but 90% of schools offering media studies are non-selective state schools.

**On the other hand, Independent schools are far less likely to offer non-traditional A-levels.** For example, Independent schools account for 20% of the market share of all schools offering A-levels, but only 5% of schools offering Sociology are Independent schools.

This is part of a definite shift in subject offerings across the sector. From 1997-2006 A-Level entries fell by 18% in Mathematics, 11% in Physics and 6% in Chemistry, despite total A-level entries increasing by 12%.<sup>20</sup> From 1988-2004 Mathematics entries fell by 40%.<sup>21</sup> Following curriculum changes from 2006, the number of candidates taking these subjects has started to increase. But this trend acts as a reminder that the problem of subject choice is a key modern educational issue that cannot be ignored.

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\* Non-selective state schools include 'Comprehensive', 'Modern', 'Other maintained', 'Sixth Form College', 'Other FE College'. \*\* Media studies includes Media/Film/Television Studies 19. Take-up of STEM and traditional subjects, Russell Group, 8 April 2008, <http://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/news/2008/russell-group-response-to-john-denham-s-speech-on-widening-participation.html> 20. Ibid 21. Ibid

In a recent report by Cambridge Assessment, Europe's largest exam body, a survey of students found that around **16%** of students had moved school (or college) to have access to their preferred subjects.<sup>22</sup> For many students this would not be an option.

**Table 4 shows an analysis of a selection of popular A-level subjects at Independent and non-selective state schools.** We examined the following popular non-traditional subjects: **Law, Media/Film/Television Studies, Sociology** and **Psychology**. We also examined the following popular traditional subjects: **Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry** and **Economics**.

The column entitled "Student entries" shows the number of students that studied a particular A-level subject at each type of school. It also shows this figure as a percentage of overall national uptake for this subject. The column entitled "No. of schools" shows the number of schools offering each subject for each type of school. Again, this figure is also shown as a percentage of the overall national availability of this subject.

All data included is for the school year 2006-07. It should be noted that for student entries the data for 2004-05 showed similar patterns. (No data was available for availability of subjects by type of school for 2004-05).

Table 4 A-levels offered and studied by type of school <sup>23</sup>										
	Non-selective state schools				Independent schools				Total	
	Student entries		No. of schools		Student entries		No. of schools		Entries	Schools
<b>All A-levels</b>	<b>535,856</b>	<b>74.6%</b>	<b>2,388</b>	<b>73.0%</b>	<b>108,244</b>	<b>15.1%</b>	<b>661</b>	<b>20.2%</b>	<b>718,755</b>	<b>3,270</b>
Law	13,281	96.1%	810	91.0%	198	1.4%	49	5.5%	13,820	890
Media	21,679	93.0%	1,223	90.1%	623	2.7%	76	5.6%	23,313	1,358
Sociology	22,850	93.2%	1,378	90.1%	426	1.7%	74	4.8%	24,529	1,529
Psychology	41,895	86.2%	1,675	80.6%	2,819	5.8%	273	13.1%	48,604	2,078
Maths	34,497	64.7%	1,750	71.4%	11,871	22.3%	536	21.9%	53,330	2,450
Physics	15,173	63.5%	1,575	70.3%	5,423	22.7%	500	22.3%	23,887	2,239
Chemistry	22,214	63.3%	1,646	70.9%	7,850	22.4%	512	22.1%	35,077	2,321
Economics	7,188	51.5%	673	59.3%	4,803	34.4%	347	30.6%	13,950	1,134

**Notes:**

Data for Grammar schools has not been included in this table.

22. A Level Subject Choice In England: Patterns Of Uptake And Factors Affecting Subject Preferences, Cambridge Assessment, July 2007, [http://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/ca/digitalAssets/114189\\_Survey\\_Report\\_-\\_Final.pdf](http://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/ca/digitalAssets/114189_Survey_Report_-_Final.pdf) 23. Achievement and Attainment Tables, Data Services Group, Department for Children, Schools and Families

## Why do students choose 'soft' subjects?

Education commentators have often assumed that students from non-selective state schools are being pushed into taking 'soft' subjects (that may be easier to get better grades in) to boost their all-important league table results. Our research suggested that this might be part of the reason, but that factors influencing students' choices are actually more complicated and diverse.

Cambridge Assessment's report on students' choice of A-levels outlined a number of key factors influencing students' choice of A-level subjects including:<sup>24</sup>

- **Students, in general, choose their subjects because they think they will enjoy them or find them interesting.** Around **78%** said this motivated their choice. This may be a useful explanation of the attractiveness of new subjects such as **Media Studies** or **Psychology** which may benefit from being 'trendy' or seeming more relevant to pupils' own lives.
- **Students who achieved good GCSE results were more likely to take traditional subjects.** This trend was reversed for newer or vocational subjects.
- **Students were also likely to follow their parents' example.** For instance, the child of a senior manager would be more likely to choose a 'professional' subject such as **Economics, Accounting** or **Business Studies**. One wonders whether their parents would know that two of these subjects are considered by some to be 'soft'.

One head of admissions told us: "Some students see them ['soft' subjects] as easy options. That is fine for some universities but not necessarily for the Russell Group. Some students are definitely selling themselves short." It is clear, however, that students may often be making these decisions without adequate advice about the implications of their subject choice.

As one vice-chancellor of a leading university told us:

**"The big problem is that many schools are failing to advise their pupils about the implications of their A-level choices. In many cases their blessed ignorance about university admissions is staggering. It is as if they don't see it as part of their job."**

## Are schools giving the right advice?

The task facing schools in providing accurate and useful higher education advice is a daunting one. Considering the sheer number of undergraduate courses available in the UK, coupled with the subtle, ever-changing requirements in universities' admissions policies, it is perhaps understandable that some schools are falling behind. However, it is disappointing and alarming that many are failing to provide even the most basic advice to students and parents.

One head of admissions recalls a conversation with a sixth form teacher at a non-selective state school who commented on how overwhelming the task can be:

**"We can just barely get through the year. Universities send us so much information...if I've got a couple of hours to spare I'll show some students, otherwise they [prospectuses, guidance information] will just get thrown in the bin."**

Catherine Baldwin, Head of Admissions at LSE, also sympathises with schools, explaining: "It must be very difficult for schools to keep on top of admissions, given that every university has its own procedures. It can be confusing and that is why several years ago we took the decision to make our procedures quite clear."

Nevertheless, it is not acceptable for schools to rest on their laurels and blame universities. An increased focus on the quality of higher education advice is urgently needed across the sector, and in non-selective state schools in particular.

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24. Cambridge Assessment, July 2007

Research from the Futuretrack survey,<sup>\*</sup> included in the Sutton Trust's report on higher education participation to the National Council for Education Excellence in October 2008, found that there are serious gaps in the level and quality of advice in schools:<sup>25</sup>

- Just **half** of young people who had applied for full-time courses through UCAS had received an adequate amount of individual careers guidance.
- Around **three-quarters** felt they had received either not enough or no information on the career implications of post-16 exam choices.
- **60%** had received not enough or no information on the relationship between higher education courses and employment, or the range of higher education courses available.

**The report also found that a “major reason behind dissatisfaction with the provision of careers and education advice emerges as the lack of training and expertise among staff”.**<sup>26</sup> The National Audit Office reported that in **two-thirds** of schools careers advice was not being delivered by appropriately trained staff.<sup>27</sup> One head of university admissions said that as a result of this lack of training among staff, “some school advisers are thinking back to when they were at university and not using up-to-date information”.

This is not just an issue for sixth-formers. **There is clear evidence to suggest that pupils should be thinking about the implications of subject choices as early as 14.** This is particularly important for students attending schools with no sixth form, who may miss out on higher education advice altogether, or receive it too late when they move schools at 16. One head of admissions told us: “We know statistically that there is a negative impact if students attend high schools with no sixth form. Schools with sixth forms recognise the importance of the choices made from an early age.”

Crucially, there is considerable disparity across the sector, with Independent schools much more likely to provide good advice. Dr Lee Elliot Major, Director of Research at the Sutton Trust told us:

**“What the Independent schools are very good at is knowing how to navigate the system. They will ask the university department what their current thinking is. That ability to have informal discussions with university admissions tutors really helps. If you don't have someone at your school who is dedicated to understanding the nuances of the admissions process from year to year you will suffer.”**

One head of admissions agreed: “Independent school students are very aware of subject combinations that universities like.” He added that the spectrum of advice between different types of schools was enormous. Such inequity is simply not acceptable. We fully endorse the Sutton Trust's recommendation that all secondary schools appoint a lead teacher with responsibility for careers and education guidance, and that this teacher should be expected to undertake regular training to keep this knowledge up to date.

## Is admissions a science or a 'dark art'?

Universities have a major responsibility to provide accurate advice that is easily accessible to a wide audience, including schools, parents and students. **Unfortunately, the process of university admissions involves many nuances, and significant inconsistencies exist in available information, which is also often very hard to find.**

The aim of any research-intensive university admissions policy is to recruit the best candidates with the best chance of succeeding in any given course. As a result, it is in universities' interests to provide as much useful information as possible to ensure the pool of appropriate candidates is sufficiently large. As one head of admissions puts it, the aim of admissions policy is “a combination of transparency with explicit information, without excluding large groups of applicants”. Sadly this “explicit” level of information is rarely achieved.

### **Judgements on the suitability of A-level subjects and combinations of subjects varies greatly between and within**

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<sup>\*</sup> Futuretrack is a major study that is following 50,000 students from UCAS application until they get their first job, with the aim of discovering how, why and when career decisions are made **25**. For a helpful summary of the findings see Increasing higher education participation amongst disadvantaged young people and schools in poor communities, The Sutton Trust, October 2008, [http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/NCEE\\_interim\\_report.pdf](http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/NCEE_interim_report.pdf) **26**. Ibid **27**. Ibid

**universities.** Some university departments have issues with particular non-traditional A-levels for reasons previously mentioned, while others are concerned with general combinations of subjects. For example, one head of admissions at a Russell Group university admitted: “For a Business degree, someone taking **English, Media** and **Drama** wouldn’t get an offer. For an English degree, they probably would.” While another explained: “We focus on the breadth and combination of subjects.” LSE supports this notion of breadth, suggesting in its guidance that **Mathematics, Economics** and **French** would be a suitable combination for almost any of its courses.

**Often the preferences of admissions tutors are counter-intuitive.** One head of admissions pointed out that “applied, or what you might call vocational, courses such as Business, Accounting and Law prefer three academic A-levels”, while “Business and Law tutors in particular don’t like combinations of closely related subjects”.

Another consideration is the competitiveness of a particular course, with only some departments deeming it necessary to take a view on A-level subject choice. One head of admissions stated: “It depends on how competitive the course is. For Chemistry, Physics and Engineering there are more places than applicants, so having the basic A-level requirements is adequate,” adding that for highly competitive courses such as Law and Social Sciences selection criteria is much tougher.

**Ultimately, there are no hard and fast rules in university admissions,** which makes the task of remaining transparent about selection criteria even harder. As one head of admissions put it, “There is an element of admissions that is a dark art.”

## How clear is the information in the public domain?

The Russell Group states on its website that its members “now offer clear recommendations on the package of A Levels...which would be a less ideal combination” and “our institutions are posting entry profiles on the UCAS website giving detailed guidance to learners as early as Year 11”.<sup>28</sup>

In reality, very few universities actually offer any public advice on “less ideal combinations” of A-levels, while those that do don’t always make the information easy to find. As well as simply putting this type of information in the public domain, universities have a duty to ensure that such guidelines are almost impossible to miss.

Some universities have made laudable moves to be more explicit, but could go further in making the information clear and easy to find. For example:

- **Manchester University makes reference to differences in department admissions policies in the general entry requirements page but fails to provide a list of generally non-preferred subjects.**
- **Edinburgh University has compiled a long list of approved subjects for university entry but undermines this by including confusing disclaimers that subjects with a high practical content may be counted against prospective applicants without being clear what these subjects are.**
- **Southampton University School of Law clearly states a preference for traditional subjects on its admissions webpage but then goes on to include a much more extensive list of acceptable and less suitable subjects in a downloadable FAQ section. One wonders why this full list isn’t clearly displayed on the admissions homepage.**

A small number of universities are explicit about A-level subject preferences on individual department webpages but major inconsistencies exist between their websites and entry profiles\* on UCAS, and in some cases between entry profiles for different departments of the same university. Some examples include:

- **Bath makes reference in the entry profiles for the BSc Business Administration and BSc Architecture to additional selection criteria, but includes the information in different sections of the entry profile page. Furthermore, information on one of these pages is much more explicit than the other.**
- **Nottingham School of Law states that “subjects with a substantial practical element are not accepted for entry” on its entry profile but does not mention this on the department website, nor does it mention what these subjects might be.**

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28. Current Policy Statements, Russell Group, <http://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/policy-statements.html> \* Entry profiles are compiled by university staff and detail useful information about university courses such as content, methods of study and course requirements

## What more can UCAS do?

Following the Government's White Paper on *The future of higher education* in 2003, an independent review of admissions was commissioned (known as the Schwartz Review) from which sprung numerous initiatives and programmes.<sup>29</sup> In 2006, a sector-led body called the Delivery Partnership pledged to work towards clear university entry profiles on the UCAS website for **85% of undergraduate courses by September 2008 and 100% by September 2009**.<sup>30</sup> Disappointingly, the sector has failed to meet this target: **entry profiles for only 65% of undergraduate courses were posted by September 2008**.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, in updating their entry requirements universities are not yet required to be explicit about any subjects that might be less preferred for particular courses. **UCAS should take a strong lead on this by insisting that such information must form part of these entry profiles.**

However, it would be unfair to blame universities alone for falling behind on this. Many admissions departments report that they have had serious difficulty inputting the information using the UCAS data entry system. One head of admissions said: **"From an admissions point of view the entry profiles are very difficult to use and very difficult to keep up-to-date. They are a complete nightmare and require quite a lot of knowledge."** Another agreed: "We're concerned about how to keep up-to-date with UCAS. We try to do it as one process, but it's definitely a challenge. Uploading is very difficult. There's a strong need for UCAS to look at how information is managed in a straightforward manner."

**If the sector is to be encouraged to be more transparent then it is essential that UCAS ensures that its data entry system does not actively deter admissions tutors from keeping their admissions information as current as possible.**

## Conclusion

The debate over whether some A-levels are easier than others has masked a much more pressing issue. **The fact that the Government claims there is no such thing as a 'soft' subject is immaterial if leading universities believe that certain subjects do not provide adequate preparation for higher education and prefer not to accept them.**

And it is clear from our research that they do. **The vast majority of research-intensive universities admit fewer 'soft' A-levels and more traditional A-levels in comparison with the national uptake of these subjects in schools.** In some universities, including Oxford University, Imperial College London, University College London, Bristol University, Durham University and St Andrews University, the difference in uptake of 'soft' and traditional subjects is very significant.

This is not in itself a problem. We feel strongly that individual universities have the right to make their own decisions about whether a subject provides the right preparation for a particular course or not. Universities are autonomous institutions (something the government often forgets) and they are the ones who have to deal with the consequences of accepting students who cannot cope with the course.

**However, the fact that research-intensive universities are failing to be properly transparent about these subject prejudices is far from acceptable.** LSE and Cambridge risked public and media disapproval by publishing lists of non-preferred subjects. No other university has been brave enough to put its head above the parapet in the same manner. **Very few research-intensive universities offer any advice on 'less ideal' combinations of A-levels, while those that do often do not make the information easy to find. This is disappointing and potentially harmful.**

It should be noted that the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) plans to publish data on the breakdown of A-levels for undergraduate admissions for the first time early next year. This is a step in the right direction. However, it must not be used to let the sector off the hook on transparency. **It is vital that universities acknowledge that it is not**

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<sup>29</sup>. For a helpful summary of university admissions reviews see *Admissions: the higher education sector's plans for change*, Universities UK, June 2008, [http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Bookshop/Documents/policybrief\\_admissions.pdf](http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Bookshop/Documents/policybrief_admissions.pdf) <sup>30</sup>. *Ibid* <sup>31</sup>. Choose the right course based on your preferences, not other people's, UCAS, <http://wwwucas.com/students/maturestudents/courses/whichcourse>

**enough for a statistical agency (which the majority of teachers, parents and students may never have heard of) to take responsibility for publishing this kind of information.** It is not enough for data about A-level subjects admitted to be available on the HESA website – or even for that data to be written about by the media. Unless UCAS and universities' own websites are truly open and up-to-date such a move will be relatively meaningless.

**The bottom line is that universities must take an active role in making it clear to those seeking practical higher education advice what subjects will give them the best chance of a successful application to their university.** We would certainly not advocate any further interference by government in the admissions process, but it is important that ministers give a strong signal that they regard this transparency as critical.

**The current situation has serious implications for the vital agenda to widen access to universities.** Subject choice has become yet another hurdle that may prevent students from less-advantaged families achieving their full academic potential. There is a clear correlation between subject choice and the type of school a pupil attends. **Non-selective state school students are far more likely to take non-traditional A-levels than students from Independent and Grammar schools.** There seems little doubt that Independent schools – many of them with an eye firmly on what universities want – continue to guide their students towards more traditional subjects. **Indeed few Independent and Grammar schools even offer many of the 'softer' subjects.**

Again, the key issue here is transparency. If an A-level student chooses to study **Business Studies** and **Law** because they find them most exciting that is of course fine. However, if that student is unaware that this subject choice may bar the door to some of the top universities in the UK this is wildly unfair. Sadly, there is a large disparity between the standard of higher education advice in Independent and non-selective state schools. **An increased focus on the quality of higher education advice is urgently needed across the sector, and in non-selective state schools in particular.**

Please see overleaf for our recommendations.

## Recommendations

- **All research-intensive universities must take immediate action to improve transparency on non-preferred subjects.** Each university should give clear guidance on the first page of the admissions section of their website, stating that they consider certain subjects less effective preparation for certain courses. They should provide a full list of these subjects, following in the footsteps of LSE and Cambridge. We understand that there are considerable variations according to department and type of degree. However, these differences can be clarified on individual department admissions pages.
- **The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) should take a lead on improving transparency about subject preference via their website.** They should urge universities to be clear about any non-preferred subjects in explicit terms in their entry profiles. Universities must make sure that there are not confusing inconsistencies between the guidance they provide for UCAS and that available on their own websites. As part of this UCAS must work to make it easier for university admissions tutors to update their information.
- **We fully endorse the Sutton Trust’s recommendation that all secondary schools should appoint a lead teacher with responsibility for careers and education guidance from existing staff.** This teacher should be expected to undertake regular training to keep this knowledge up to date. Schools should ensure that sufficient non-teaching time is allocated to enable this teacher to fulfil the role effectively. We are not reassured by the Government’s recent Next Steps report on 14-19 education, which paid very little attention to the specific problems of higher education advice in schools.<sup>32</sup> In particular, the uncosted promise that by 2010 every secondary school pupil will have a personal tutor (who it admits will not do the job of an admissions specialist) seems unlikely to be achieved.

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### Work on universities at Policy Exchange

‘The hard truth about ‘soft’ subjects’ is the first report in a major new programme of work at Policy Exchange on universities. Over the next year we will be looking at ways of freeing our universities. How can we get a more dynamic university system and compete with the best in the world? Should we change the way that universities are funded? How do we maintain fairness and promote wider access to universities? What about older students? And how can universities become part of our entrepreneurial culture? These are some of the crucial questions we will seek to answer.

For further information about this new programme please contact Anna Fazackerley, Senior Adviser on Universities, on [anna.fazackerley@policyexchange.org.uk](mailto:anna.fazackerley@policyexchange.org.uk).

### About Policy Exchange

Policy Exchange, an independent educational charity, is Britain’s largest centre-right think tank. Our mission is to develop and promote new policy ideas which will foster a free society based on strong communities, limited government, national self confidence and an enterprise culture. In contrast to many other think tanks Policy Exchange is committed to an evidence-based approach to policy development. Our impact speaks for itself: from housing to policing reform, education to the NHS, our proposals have been taken on board by the main political parties. Registered charity number 1096300.

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<sup>32</sup>. Delivering 14-19 Reform: Next Steps, Department for Children, Schools and Families, October 2008, [http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/14-19/documents/delivering\\_14-19\\_reform.pdf](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/14-19/documents/delivering_14-19_reform.pdf)