

Holy Cross College, Bury

Taking 4 Subjects?

If you are considering studying 4 advanced level subjects you may wish to consider the information below which reflects the thoughts of one of our Year 13 students last year.

Balance & Time

I took 4 A-Levels, an EPQ and had a part time job so I know what it's like first-hand to genuinely have no time - I would really recommend choosing two of these things as opposed to all three, as you will end up either behind, overworked or both. I wouldn't advise having a job as it takes up more time than you anticipate and employers are really harsh with shifts, especially in retail and fast food - they don't care that you're part time and/or have other commitments! However, if you really need to, make sure you're not working more than two days max, or it will affect both your academic work ethic and your physical health.

Acknowledge that your timetable will be full. Whilst your mates are out doing something or eating together, you will most likely have a lesson. As high achievers you'll also probably do extra curriculums, which then creates a possible 8:45-5pm work day sometimes with one lunch break, before then having to go home and do whatever homework or coursework you have.

Subjects

Consider which subjects you're choosing. As stated above, your timetable will already be pretty packed, however, some subjects take up more slots. For example, I took theatre studies which then meant more time was taken up for rehearsals, performance times, coursework - and I imagine this is the same for other creative subjects such as music and dance.

Consider the content levels for the subjects you're choosing - does it have coursework? Any practical elements? How will you be assessed? I took History, Law, English and drama which all have a lot of content that needs to be memorised very specifically - try not to take four humanities if you can help it, a good balance of subjects will help you when it comes to revision.

Similarly, pick subjects that complement each other. For example, a lot of knowledge about plays and writing that I gained from drama was then really useful for when we did plays in English Lit, and knowledge I got from history was useful in drama and English when we had to study historical texts. You don't have to, but it helps to be able to revise one topic and then apply it to multiple subjects, in a 'killing two birds with one stone' kind of thing - on the Oxford subject pages for each degree they usually include guidance on choosing subjects that help your future degree, e.g. on the law page it says that History and English are helpful subjects to have due to transferrable skills.

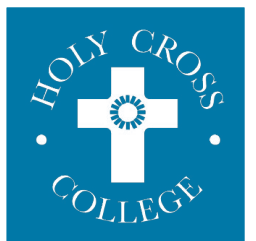
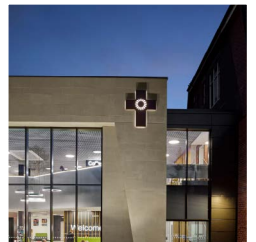
Finally, make sure you're choosing a subject because you're good at it and/or you really enjoy it. If you're aiming for Oxbridge, try and choose 3 'hard' subjects (humanities, sciences, maths/English, languages) and one 'soft' subject (the arts, criminology/sociology etc), or four 'hard' subjects.

Although it's not really fair for top unis to categorise subjects in this way as 'soft' subjects usually have the same if not more work, but unfortunately there is still a stigma wherein certain subjects are perceived as less academic.

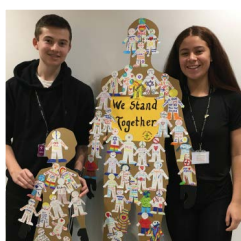
Compromised Grades/Regret

If you're going to choose to do four A-Levels, this obviously means you have committed to spreading your time more thinly across your subjects, so each subject gets less attention and time. Therefore, you need to be secure in the fact that you won't regret taking four if this then compromises your grades in any way. For example, if you took three you may have gotten A*A*A*, but taking four may cause you to get A*AAB or something similar - would you be okay with that? Would you rather have three better grades or are you comfortable with doing four and possibly getting four slightly lower grades. Of course taking four subjects doesn't doom you to get lower grades, and straight A/A*s is very much achievable, but you just need to make sure that in the worst case scenario where you don't get the grade that you want you won't end up blaming yourself and saying 'I shouldn't have taken four, it wasn't worth it', as you don't want to end up with regret. Just make sure you're confident and committed to your decision, whatever that may be.

On the positive side, however, doing four subjects can also act as a comfort pillow to your offer. For example, someone taking three subjects would have to get AAA if that was their offer, but when you take four only three grades are accounted for so even if you got AAAD, you'd still make the offer even though you're weaker in one of your subjects or had a bad day and did terribly. As you're considering taking four I'm sure you guys' grades will be brilliant, but again this is just a worst-case scenario thing again.



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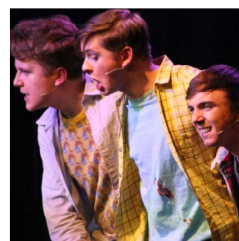
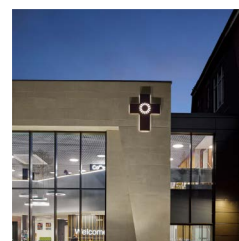
Final Thoughts

Overall, one of the most important things when it comes to this decision is your intention behind wanting to take four subjects. All in all, someone taking three has just as equal of a chance at getting into a top uni as someone who takes four, and the same thing goes for taking an EPQ as well: unis aren't that bothered about how much you put on your plate, it's whether you do it well that matters. Three A-Levels is already more than enough work, so if you're taking four make sure it's genuinely because you have a passion/interest in the subject and are willing to devote your time to it; there's no point in choosing something just because it may seem impressive on paper. I'm currently in a WhatsApp chat for Oxford freshers and I think there's around a 50/50 split between students who did four and students who did three, so it really is the least important part of your application. The same can be said for other top unis too. However, if you want to do four and think it's for you, go for it! As long as you ensure to stay on top of things whilst also giving yourself some free time, you'll be fine. Balance and a good mindset are always the key aspects to any academic endeavour, really. Try not to oversubscribe to too many extra-curriculars if you can help it, and make sure whatever you do is somewhat subject relevant. For example, I took part in mock trial which really helped when writing my personal statement for law. If you do begin to struggle with the workload, make sure to let your teachers know as suffering in silence is only going to stress you out and pile up the work even more!

If I had to go back and do it again, I would probably have dropped theatre studies as, although it was extremely interesting and enjoyable, I realised that I preferred writing essays to practical work of any kind, and the subject ended up being my most difficult one due to the method of assessment (practical work is more subjective to the interpretation of the marker rather than a black-and-white mark scheme). However, I still would have taken four subjects and probably have chosen politics instead as this is more relevant to my law degree and I also find it really interesting – sometimes the nature of the subject itself can be a bigger issue than the number of subjects you take, so choose wisely! Everyone is different in terms of how they prefer to learn and be assessed, so make sure to play to your strengths. For example, if you're terrible with exam pressure, choose something with coursework so you have something to fall back on.

Aisha Rab

Studying Law at Oxford University



Things to consider when taking 4 A-Levels

- ❑ The workload at A-Level is high. Picking 4 subjects means you spread yourself more thinly. If you are prepared to do this, please also consider other commitments like hobbies and part-time work, to make sure you can fit everything in.
- ❑ No university in the UK requires 4 A-Levels, although Cambridge do state that it can be an advantage in a few of their subjects (see: www.lucy.cam.ac.uk/subject-choice-guidance). For most universities, having an extra A-Level does not provide an advantage as they would only ask for 3 grades on their offers.
- ❑ Top universities do want high grades, so how would you feel if you got AABB and were rejected but could have achieved AAA if you had focussed on 3 subjects?
- ❑ Universities have found that students completing an EPQ do better in their degrees than students who do not. Having a combination of 3 A-Levels and an EPQ is better from the university perspective as you have both the academic knowledge and research skills they require. The EPQ allows you to research a topic of your choice, rather than being confined to a specification, so is more flexible than an extra A-Level.

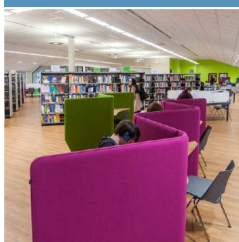
If you absolutely love a range of subjects and have considered all the points above but still wish to pursue 4 A-Levels, then we hope you enjoy studying an extra A-Level with us.



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