

How to make the best leaving cert choices

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The subject choices you make will either severely limit or expand your options when it comes to college, writes **LOUISE HOLDEN**

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It's make your mind up time for students entering the Leaving Cert cycle later this year. There's a lot to consider. Your parents usually have an opinion. Your teachers may have something to say. You may feel influenced by outside factors, such as the collapse of the property market ("won't be choosing construction") or the bailout ("might be taking German").

Ultimately it's really between you and your guidance counsellor, because two areas of consideration trump all others: What do you like? Only you know that. What do you need? Your career guidance counsellor knows that.

Your final choices should balance your interests with the requirements of the colleges and universities. You might not like French very much, for example, but if you choose to drop it and have no modern language, that shuts you out of many universities. You might love science and decide to take all three science subjects, but that puts you on a very narrow path beyond school.

Honor McAndrew is a careers guidance counsellor at St Andrew's College, Booterstown, Co Dublin and she points to the need to keep your options open.

"It is not recommended that students over-specialise," she advises. "Don't take all three laboratory sciences, or all three business subjects, unless you are sure that these really are the areas you want to get into when you leave school and that they are course entry requirements.

"Very few young people of 15 or 16 years of age are sure of what they want to do after school, and may change their minds about possible future careers a number of times before they do the Leaving Cert."

McAndrew recommends asking yourself the following questions: What subject am I most interested in? Which subjects am I likely to be best at? What subjects will I need?

"The answers to the first two questions will be closely linked. If you are interested in, and like something, it is easier to do well at it.

"To see what subjects you will need for your chosen courses, get a sheet of paper and list any career areas and third-level courses you are interested in, find out the entry requirements, and list them."

When you have finished this exercise, look at subject balance. Most counsellors recommend a blend of Irish, English, Maths, a continental language, a science and two or three other subjects.

In terms of college entry, you'll need the points for your course, but you'll also need to meet the matriculation requirements of the particular college. For example, to get into Trinity you must have a grade C3 in at least three higher level subjects. In that instance it might be risky to start dropping down a level in subjects and leaving yourself open to missing the matriculation requirement even if you do have the points for your course.

Many students choose to drop higher maths for the Leaving. This is often based on the notion that the subject is too work-intensive – ordinary level maths leaves more room to study other subjects.

It's a pity to take this decision if you genuinely have an aptitude for maths, and now that there are bonus points for higher maths, the option to stay is more attractive. This year 25 points will be added to an applicant's points score for higher level maths. For example, according to CAO figures, a higher D3 in maths will score 70 points instead of 45.

After matriculation you need to consider the subject requirements of various courses.

Some subjects require higher maths, or a science subject, regardless of your points score. A grade C3 in higher level maths is the minimum entry requirement for the majority of engineering degree courses, for example, whereas veterinary medicine in UCD requires a higher level grade C3 in chemistry.

On the other hand accounting, economics and business are not required to study these subjects at third level. However, it will obviously be a help to your future studies if you avail of the option to study them at school.

Working out entry requirements for the various courses can be labyrinthine so do it in conjunction with your career guidance counsellor.

Ultimately, you need the points to get the prizes. Getting the best points you can involves doing the best exam you can. That's where interest and aptitude come in. Only you know which subjects you enjoy and feel you can do well in. For matriculation or subject requirements you may have to take a subject or two that you might otherwise reject, but the majority of your subjects should be selected based on interest if you want to maximise points.

“Remember that the Leaving Certificate requires a great amount of hard work over two years,” McAndrew advises students. “It's easier to put in the work if you have chosen, in so far as is possible, subjects you like. The Leaving Certificate requires a sense of purpose and motivation to get accepted for your first-preference course.”

Knowing exactly what you will need in each subject at each level will help give you that sense of purpose.

Another very important aspect of this process is to know what it is you're working towards. An open day alone might not give you a real sense of the course you have put at the top of your CAO list.

Very often there is a huge difference between studying a subject at school level and studying it at university.

If you choose all business subjects because you have your heart set on a third-level business course that you actually haven't properly researched, you might find out too late that you pitched all your choices and efforts towards a course that actually didn't suit you in the first place.

My choices and why I made them

Rory Crean,

500-600 points

I am a first year medical student in UCD and I got straight As in my Leaving Cert last year. I went to Blackrock College for most of my secondary schooling but moved to the Institute of Education for the exam year. At that stage I reconsidered the levels at which I was taking key subjects, and chose to move to ordinary level in maths and Irish.

I chose higher English, ordinary maths, ordinary Irish, French, geography, physics, chemistry and music. Taking music was a great move for me. If you have a talent outside of school that can have any application to any subject, take that subject.

For me, I could wrap up nearly 50 per cent (if all went well) before I even opened a textbook which meant the pressure was off when it came to the written music exam.

The other thing that really saved me during the year was the level I took each subject at. Everyone remembers the debacle that was Maths Paper 1 last year. I felt really lucky to have opted to go with ordinary maths. And even though the maths paper was marked fairly and everyone got the grade they probably deserved, the blow to your mental state that that exam could have caused could have had a knock-on into other subjects. I know it can happen in any subject, but it just reaffirms the fact that if you're ever teetering on the brink between higher and ordinary, on a subject that you may very well not count, make life easier for yourself where possible.

Ciaran Nevin,

400–500 points

I did mechanical engineering at DIT. I got 420 points. Based on my interests I chose construction, engineering, biology and chemistry. I had won awards in engineering in school and I come from a family of builders and tradespeople so it wasn't a difficult choice for me to take those subjects for the Leaving.

I have a personal interest in psychology as well so I took the science subjects to keep my options open there. If I decided against engineering at college in the end, I would still be able to pursue the science route.

Despite this I still managed to severely limit myself with the subject choices that I made at school. I decided against taking a language because I never enjoyed the way languages are taught at school and I felt that I wouldn't do that well in French and so I would lose points in the process. My careers guidance counsellor at the time warned me that without a language I would be closing off the option of going to many of the universities, but I didn't really take it on board. As it turns out, I'm delighted I went to DIT, but I still think I made that choice without fully considering the doors I was closing.

The other door I closed was honours maths – by opting to go down to ordinary level I closed off the option of doing engineering at DCU. I chose the subjects based on maximising my points rather than leaving all courses open to me. It was a gamble that a lot of students have to take.

It was all based on the fact that I had made up my mind about doing mechanical engineering. Looking back, I probably should have researched the course a bit better. It was not what I expected at all – much more theoretical and less practical than engineering at Leaving Cert. It worked out in the end and I have my degree, but I made very specific subject choices based on a course that I didn't really know much about.

I'd like to have a European language now but I still don't think it would have served me well to keep French on at school. I might take up a language now, but if I do it will just be for conversational use.

Michelle Dougherty,

300-400 points

I'm a final year student of arts (English and geography) at UCD. The course required 370 points the year I did the Leaving, which was reasonable. I chose English, Irish, maths, German, geography, biology and social and scientific.

Some of my subjects worked out well in terms of exams. I did well in both my geography and English exams, which were my favourite subjects to study then and still are today.

Staying with higher level Irish, on reflection, was a peculiar choice. Irish has always been one of my weakest subjects, which is a shame.

I kept with higher level for the final exam, and so I was never expecting an A in that! Despite that I don't think I would change anything, because it was all part of the journey that got me to where I am today.

My best advice to students choosing subjects now is to choose something you really do enjoy, if you intend to carry on with it as I did. Many undergraduates, as high as one in three in some

courses, drop out before Christmas of their first year, due to poor course choice. This is often a continuation of poor subject choices made for the Leaving Cert.

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