



UCL

What I wish I'd known before starting my A-levels

Top tips from current UCL students



What I wish I'd known before starting my A-levels

Introduction

Preparing to finish secondary school and progress on to study A-levels can be both exciting and scary. As you probably know, with this next stage of education comes a lot more responsibility and independence. You will need to make decisions about where and what you will study, you will have greater control over your time and you will be expected to take more responsibility for your learning.

We asked a number of current UCL students, who were in your position only a few years ago, to reflect on what they wish they'd known before starting their A-levels. We hope their experiences will help prepare you for the transition to the next stage of your educational journey.

The UCL students



Fatima

- UCL degree programme: MBBS Medicine
- A-levels: Biology, Chemistry, History, Maths



Jakub

- UCL degree programme: MEng Engineering & Architectural Design
- A-levels: English German, Maths, Physics



Khalid

- UCL degree programme: BEng Chemical Engineering
- A-levels: Chemistry, Maths, Physics



Liberty

- UCL degree programme: BSc Psychology with Education
- A-levels: English Literature, Psychology, Religious Studies



Sabah

- UCL degree programme: BS Geography
- A-levels: Geography, History, Sociology



Syed

- UCL degree programme: BSc Economics
- A-levels: Economics, History, Maths, Further Maths



What advice would you give to help someone make their A-level subject choices?

If you know for sure what you want to study at university, I recommend starting by looking at the entry requirements for that course as you may find that there are some compulsory subjects. I knew pretty early on that I wanted to study medicine at university and so that meant studying Biology and Chemistry at A-level, as these were a minimum requirement for most UK medical schools.

For my other two subjects in Year 12 I decided to go for Maths and History, as these were subjects that I enjoyed during school and figured that this passion would probably be enough to drive me through the challenges of A-levels. And I was right, I really enjoyed all the subjects I studied, and if I had to do it all over again, I would not change any of them!

Fatima

Although you don't need to know exactly what university degree you may want to pursue as soon as you begin college (I certainly didn't), you may want to choose A-level subjects that reflect your preference for a broad subject type – for example, science or humanities based. If you have completely no idea, some universities prefer a range of A-levels called 'facilitating subjects', so be sure to check these out.

Khalid

When choosing my A-levels, the most important thing for me was to choose subjects that I both enjoyed and was good at. Given that you'll be studying these subjects for two years, it would be hard to motivate yourself to work hard if the subjects you take are ones you find difficult and don't really have an interest in.

Syed

By studying subjects that you enjoy, it'll begin to give you an idea of what you may want to do beyond A-levels, whether that's university, an apprenticeship or otherwise.

Syed

How did A-levels compare to your experiences at school?

The biggest difference I found was that I had quite a lot more spare time in my timetable, with at least one or two free periods each day. At first, I spent much of this new-found freedom with friends, but I then began to realise that this time would be better spent in the student centre getting on with work. I created my own little timetable where I set myself tasks to complete during free periods. This helped me to keep on top of my studying and revision so that I wasn't overwhelmed by work in the evenings and on weekends.

Syed

The main change I found from my GCSEs was that I was more responsible for my own learning and making sure I was organised. Asking questions became really important as information doesn't generally come up again later. However, I found the change largely positive as I enjoyed having the freedom to study the subjects I wanted to and had escaped those I didn't.

Liberty

I found there to be less 'spoon-feeding' in the sense that when homework was set, there would be no consequences for not completing it – but completing it would actually significantly aid your learning. I therefore felt that you had to put a lot more pressure on yourself to meet deadlines and stay on top of your work.

Fatima



What were the biggest challenges you faced when completing your A-levels?

For me, it was finding time in Year 13 to focus on revising Year 12 content, which, because of the linear system, would also be assessed in the end of Year 13 exams. I found that the best way to tackle this issue was to keep organised with a rigid timetable. Often in free periods I would dedicate specific time for homework and revision for Year 12 topics. Even having different folders for different papers can do wonders to manage the motherload of information you will learn in the two years during A-levels!

Sabah

My biggest challenge was coming to terms with the fact not all my work would be good right away. I did well in my humanities subjects from the outset, but got awful grades in English. Not all subjects rely on the same skill set; the standard of writing expected in English takes time to develop. I was patient and kept working at it even when it didn't seem to be helping. Over the two years my English grade gradually caught up with the others.

Liberty

Personally, I struggled with my time-management. As I was applying for medicine, there were many aspects to the applications that required a lot of work be put in, including organising work experience, volunteering, revising for entrance exams, working on the personal statement and then practicing for interviews. This took up a lot of my time, and I found it difficult to stay on top of my A-level workload.

As time went on, I came to realise the importance of prioritising tasks and drew up a timeline of everything that I had to do. This allowed me to understand when I had less time for studying and plan around this.

Fatima

Wise management of time is as vital as effective studying.

Jakub

How did you go about managing your time in terms of revision and exam preparation?

Every day until my final exam I made a schedule in which I specifically marked a subject and topics that I would revise each day. It was crucial to monitor my own progress. Once I realised that some topics were going better than others, I was paying more attention to ones that required more effort.

Above all, I always reminded myself to take breaks and days off to catch a breath. In my case it was Sunday that I did some sport activities and met friends. Looking back now, these Sundays were as important as studying to get through preparation and exam time.

Jakub

Year 13 was one of the most intense academic years I have faced. Part of the reason is that revision and exam preparation always took a back seat when I was learning new content, but I soon found out that this could prove detrimental to my grades. If I could do anything differently, it would be to find a balance between revising old content, exam preparation and learning new content.

Sabah



My biggest tip is to use examiner reports, they are truly magical! It's basically your examiner telling what you they like and don't like in the exam taken in the previous year! Top tip: try to ignore the fancy jargon they use and breakdown what they want to see in the exam and then DO IT!

Sabah

At the end of every lesson take some time out to review the content. Make sure you really understand what was taught before moving on to revision or new topics. If you do not understand something make a note of it and see your teacher as soon as you can to iron it out (or watch a video on it). And to really make sure you understood the concept, do an exam question on it. Then go through the mark scheme, and work through it even if you got the answer right. This really helps solidify your learning!

In terms of exam revision, in order for you to minimise the pre-exam stress, I recommend starting early! And I do not mean doing 10 hours a day from September, but doing two or three hours' worth of studying for every subject every week – and further breaking that down into 30 minutes of every subject every day. I really believe that consistency is key. Focussing on only one subject for the day or the week makes you feel really good about it at the time, but then as you move on to the next subject, most of what you've learnt goes out the window. So, by doing a little bit, often, you will find that you have covered a lot more ground by the time it gets to exams. And more importantly, what you have learnt will probably stick and you'll know it so well it shouldn't take you long to revise!

Fatima

How did your experience studying for A-levels prepare you for university?

The main thing that studying A-levels did for me in terms of preparing for university was probably the aspect of independent study and time management. I can't emphasise enough how crucial these skills are when it comes to higher education, as the onus is much more on you when it comes to studying at university. Whilst your teachers at school and college/sixth-form will chase you up when you're falling behind and performing badly in particular subjects, at university your tutors and lecturers will be expecting you to keep yourself in check and make sure that you're completing all the relevant assignments. Of course, if you are struggling with certain aspects of studying at university, whether it be the difficulty of some topics or managing your time effectively, there is support available from your department, but there's only so much they can do as you will have to put the effort in.

Syed

A-levels are a time where you are expected to juggle a few subjects at the same time, and I feel university is quite similar in that sense. Although at university you are technically studying one subject, this is broken up into different modules and you are expected to stay on top of the workload, and so getting that practice in at A-level better prepares you for university.

The few years you spend at university are not all about studying round-the-clock, rather you need to be able to build a lifestyle you enjoy. Being able to feel good about taking time out to practice the sports you enjoy, or taking up a new hobby, is really important and so starting to do that at A-levels makes you feel a bit more comfortable to incorporate it further at university.

Fatima



Looking back, what advice would you give to your younger self about to begin their A-levels?

Work out how you learn best and utilise that. It's much easier to study when you are playing to your strengths and not working against yourself.

Do the work earlier rather than later. Don't wait for exams to revise. You'll thank yourself for it later.

Just relax and try your best. I know I did everything I could and I think there is a peace that comes with that, whatever way the results play out.

Liberty

Make sure you pace yourself and keep in the habit of studying regularly. While it may be relatively easy to cram knowledge for GCSE exams, it's far, far harder to do so when it comes A-levels, as you have to develop a sense of understanding over time that you just can't do over a few days and weeks (or at least I couldn't!).

Perhaps most importantly, make sure you give yourself time to relax and enjoy other things in life – remember, you're far more than just an A-level student! If you find that your A-levels are stopping you from taking part in extracurricular activities or hobbies that you enjoy, chances are that it's not A-levels getting in the way but a lack of effective time management. And while your A-Level grades might give you a boost on your path to a particular goal in life, it's your ability to look after your mental health and softer skills that will take you that much further and allow you to enjoy your time during school and beyond!

Syed

Ask for help...and keep asking. Whether it is to mark, read or re-read your work, ask for help from teachers, friends and online forums. A-

levels are hard but doing it alone makes it even harder and much more daunting. People are willing to help. Let them.

Sabah

Do not compare yourself and your progress to that of others. Everyone does things at a different pace, so have an aim that is specific to you and focus on working towards it.

Fatima

Be open to new experiences and push yourself out of your comfort zone.

Khalid

