

Choosing subjects to study in the UK education system

In the sixth form in UK schools (Years 12 and 13) students usually study fewer subjects than you will in your own country which allows them to specialise and study these in greater depth. The choice of subjects is very important as it can affect which university courses are available to you and also your eventual career path.

The examination system you will follow will normally be one of the following:

- A level
- International Baccalaureate Diploma (IB)
- Scottish Highers and Advanced Highers

and these systems lead to examinations at the end of two years of study which are essential for entry into university. These qualifications are recognised not only in the UK but also internationally. However, to qualify for entry into university in your own country you may be required to take mandatory national examinations or take certain combinations of subjects. **You should check carefully to make sure of compatibility with your intentions for higher education when selecting subject options**, bearing in mind that, if you obtain a scholarship with HMC Projects, **you are most likely to attend a university in mainland Europe** after being in a UK school. UK universities and those in the USA are very expensive, and obtaining scholarships (financial assistance) is extremely rare and very competitive.

In the **A level system**, you will choose 3 or, in some cases, 4 subjects and you will take examinations in these after two years of study. Most schools will normally require certain A level subjects, notably languages and sciences, to have been studied previously. Many schools offer students the chance to complement their A-Level studies by taking an Extended Project Qualification. Some, more practical subjects may be taught to the **BTEC specifications** – HMCP Projects advises against taking BTEC qualifications, as they are not normally recognised by universities outside the UK.

For the **International Baccalaureate diploma**, you have a degree of choice of subjects, but you must study literature, and mathematics; as well as at least one science and at least one societal subject (e.g., economics, geography, history). You study your chosen six subjects to higher (HL) or standard level (SL) depending on which are more important for university entry onto the course of your choice. Broadly speaking, those subjects you study at higher level will be equivalent to the subjects studied at A level. The idea of the IB is to maintain your breadth of knowledge and skills. In this system you are also required to write an extended essay and to study 'Theory of Knowledge (TOK)'. In most schools offering IB because of the breadth requirement, you cannot study more than 2 science subjects, so for science degrees in the Netherlands A-Level is preferable.

Scottish Highers require one year of study and the **Advanced Highers** normally require two years. As the name suggests this examination syllabus is followed in many schools in Scotland although some Scottish schools teach A level or IB courses instead. It is very unusual for Scottish Highers and Advanced Highers to be taught outside Scotland.

The scholarship offered by schools through HMC Projects is **for two years** to enable you to complete your courses and take the final examinations for entry into university or college.

Your choice of subjects

The choice of subjects that you might study in your UK school depends on several factors:

- Your interest and ability in a subject;
- Your choice of university;
- Your choice of subject to study at university;
- Your choice of career

There is normally a large range of subjects to choose from in any school, but not all schools offer the same set of subjects. This is often the case with some foreign languages: for instance, one school may offer German language and another may not. There are two further important points:

- If you choose to study English in the UK, then you will normally be studying English **Literature**;
- If you choose French, German or Spanish then, generally, you will be expected to have studied these for **at least** two years to achieve the right level;

Note: some IB courses offer a language ab initio i.e. for beginners.

It is also important to be aware that universities may prefer certain subjects for entry onto a particular course. Generally, universities can be rather traditional in the subjects they prefer. These subjects are generally on offer in every school and are listed in the left column in the table below:

Subjects popular with universities	
Normally offered by all schools	Offered only by some schools
Biology Chemistry English Literature Economics French Geography History Art Mathematics Further Mathematics Music Physics Spanish	Business Classical Civilisation Computer Science Design Tech (Graphics) Design Tech (Product Design) Drama and Theatre Studies English Language Latin Greek German Psychology Religious Studies Politics

Below (on page 3) we give examples of subject combinations useful for certain university courses. However, as already stated, most HMC Projects Scholars are unlikely to study at UK university and the subject entry requirements can vary between universities across Europe and beyond. In the table below, the subjects listed in bold form an A list and the others a B list of subjects. For the purposes of entry into university outside the UK, HMC Projects does not recommend taking more than one B list subject. In the case of entry into German universities, for example, selecting more than one subject from the B list will be problematic for entry into public universities.

A list of subjects	
Biology	Greek
Chemistry	History
Computer Science	Latin
Economics	Mathematics

B list of subjects
Art
Music
Business
Classical Civilisation

English Language English Literature French Geography German	Further Mathematics Physics Politics Spanish
---	---

Design Tech (Graphics) Design Tech (Product Design) Drama and Theatre Studies Psychology Religious Studies
--

Before applying, and certainly before accepting a HMC Projects scholarship, make sure that you have researched these requirements fully, with an eye to your own academic and career aspirations.

Course	Preferred subjects for university
Medicine, Dentistry, Veterinary Science	Biology and Chemistry. Other things being equal, taking either Maths or Physics is advisable to meet the entry requirements of a wider number of European universities. <i>It will be extremely difficult to find an affordable option to study one of these courses at university outside your own country, regardless of your academic achievements at school. If you are certain that you wish to study one of these subjects, but your family financial circumstances are more modest (e.g. below the full scholarship threshold) we would not recommend taking forward an application for a HMC Projects scholarship. For these professions the most straightforward arrangement is to continue schooling in your own country and studying and qualifying for these professions there.</i>
Natural Sciences	Two or three of Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Mathematics.
Engineering	Mathematics and Physics are required. Further Mathematics is advised.
Computer Science	Mathematics is required. Computer Science or Physics are desirable.
Psychology	Two Sciences are recommended to meet the entry requirements of a wider number of European universities.
Economics and PPE	Whilst Mathematics is advised, students should also consider Economics, History, Geography, Politics or Religious Studies.
Business Studies, Management, Marketing	For public EU universities, Mathematics is essential. Business, Economics, Geography, Psychology may be helpful.
Architecture	There are usually no essential subjects, but an art/science mix might be preferred, and a portfolio of your Art and/or Design work is essential.
Foreign Languages	Two languages (modern or classical) are desirable but not essential
Law	Any A Levels at the highest grade. Including a subject involving extended essay writing may be desirable.

Before you consider studying for a **professional qualification** such as **medicine, dentistry, veterinary, architecture** or **law** in another country think about whether you will be permitted to work in that country after qualifying. It is important to consider which countries will recognise such a qualification.

Thinking ahead to university courses

Our two-year programme allows scholars to complete their education in the UK and to apply for a wide variety of universities across Europe. You should be aware that, as an international student, study at university in the UK is very expensive indeed.

Scholarships to study at a UK university are very rare and you will be competing with students from all over the world for these. All scholars are encouraged and advised to consider higher education (university) outside the UK. There are universities in Europe where courses are taught in English and the fees are much more affordable than those of universities in the UK. For those HMC Projects students coming from an EU state, course fees for studying at university in another EU country cannot be higher than for home nationals – though these can vary significantly between EU countries. For those who are not EU passport holders the most likely university destination, because of the affordability of the public universities, is Germany. It should be noted, however, that fewer courses are delivered in English compared, say, to the Netherlands. Nevertheless, it would be sensible if your subject choices in a UK school aligned with that as a potential outcome.

For those offered a scholarship, HMC Projects aims to complement the university advice given by schools, with our focus being on university entry outside the UK. Our scholar Instagram contains examples of university courses taught in English in European universities and beyond. During our November Scholars' Day, students are given an overview of destinations; and then in the spring term HMC Projects runs an online university briefing, which is led by trustee David Hawkins, who runs a leading university advice company (University Guys). Following that briefing, David offers a free 15-minute consultancy to HMC Projects scholars and then links scholars to a volunteer university mentor to guide their applications.

With universities outside the UK, you should find that A levels, the IB diploma and Scottish Highers are recognised for university entrance although in some countries a process of nostrification of your results may be required. HMCP Projects advises against taking BTEC qualifications, as they are not normally recognised by public universities in Europe.

C J Burrows
Deputy Director of HMC Projects
August 2026