

A-levels: depth over breadth.

Introduced in England in 1951 to prepare students for university, A-levels have spread worldwide through their international versions. Their principle fits in one sentence: three subjects, two years, and no obligation to study anything else.

A rare freedom, which opens some doors wide and quietly closes others, sometimes as early as age 15. The whole challenge is knowing which ones before choosing.

Which student is it for?

Section 09

Which choices shape what follows?

Sections 05 and 10

What are the pitfalls in Switzerland?

Sections 07 and 11

16 – 18

Year 12 and Year 13

3

subjects as standard

A* → E

one grade per subject

0

compulsory subjects

97.5%

pass rate, 2026

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01

Framework and philosophy

A-levels are the most specialised of the major end-of-secondary qualifications. There is no core curriculum: students choose their subjects freely and study them in depth for two years.



Depth

A level close to first-year university in each subject.

Freedom

No compulsory subjects; any combination is possible.

Independence

Fewer taught hours, much more independent study expected.

02

Recent developments

The current format dates from the 2015 reform; the system has since settled again after the Covid interlude.

- 2015 – 2017** Verified
 In England, a move to a **linear** format: everything is decided by the exams at the end of Year 13. The AS level becomes a separate qualification that no longer counts towards the A-level.
- 2020 – 2021** Verified
 Exams cancelled during the pandemic; grades awarded on teacher assessment, with a sharp rise in top grades.
- 2023** Verified
 Return to pre-pandemic grading standards in England.
- 2026** Verified
 Stable results: 97.5% pass rate, 28.5% of grades at A* and A, and 906,425 entries (+2.7%).
- To watch** To verify
 Curriculum and assessment review in England: any impact on A-levels to be confirmed before each update of this guide.

Pathways

"A-levels" covers several versions. The one the school offers changes the exam calendar and the student's margin for error.

UK A-level

AQA, Pearson Edexcel, OCR

- Linear: exams at the end of Year 13
- A resit means retaking the whole exam

International A Level

Cambridge International, Pearson Edexcel

- Largely modular: some papers from Year 12 count
- Units can be resat individually
- The usual version in Switzerland

AS level

one year, intermediate level

- The first half of an A-level
- Its weight depends on the version (see below)

What is an exam board?

An exam board is the organisation that designs the syllabus for a subject, sets the papers, organises the marking and awards the qualification. The school chooses its board subject by subject; the standard is equivalent from one board to another, but the content and the calendar differ.

United Kingdom

- **AQA:** the largest English board
- **Pearson Edexcel:** strong in maths and history
- **OCR:** widely used in computing and the sciences
- **WJEC Eduqas:** the English arm of the Welsh board

International (including Switzerland)

- **Cambridge International:** the most widespread in international schools
- **Pearson Edexcel International:** unit-based, with sessions in January and June
- **OxfordAQA:** less common

AS level or A-level: what's the difference?

The AS level is the first half of an A-level: one year, roughly half the content.

AS level	A-level
LENGTH 1 year (Year 12)	LENGTH 2 years (Years 12 and 13)
VALUE About half an A-level	VALUE The full qualification
IN THE UK A separate qualification: does not count towards the A-level	IN THE UK Everything rests on the exams at the end of Year 13
INTERNATIONAL VERSION Counts for half of the final A-level	INTERNATIONAL VERSION AS + second part (A2) in Year 13
TYPICAL USE A 4th subject dropped after a year, or a safety net	TYPICAL USE The 3 main subjects

The question to ask the school: does the AS count towards the final grade? The answer changes the whole Year 12 strategy.

EPQ

An optional individual research project, worth half an A-level, that showcases independent work.

BTEC and T Levels: vocational routes

Alternatives at 16 in England, for a more applied profile.

A note on Scotland

Its own system, Highers and Advanced Highers: these are not A-levels.

04

Structure and teaching

Two years of Sixth Form, three subjects, around 360 guided learning hours per subject.

Year 12 · Lower Sixth

First contact with A-level standard; internal end-of-year exams that underpin predicted grades.

Year 13 · Upper Sixth

Deeper study, assessed coursework, final exams in May–June.

Typical weekly workload



Orders of magnitude: expected independent study approaches the volume of lessons. Actual hours vary by school.

Small groups

Small classes in each subject, close to a seminar format.

Study periods

Free slots in the timetable, to be filled with independent study.

Written work

Essays, extended problems, practical work in the sciences.

05

Subjects and skills

The most popular subjects in the UK in 2026, by number of entries:

1 Mathematics

2 Psychology

3 Biology

4 Chemistry

5 Economics

6 Business Studies

7 History

8 Physics

9 Sociology

10 Art & Design

Then, in order: English Literature, Geography, Politics, Further Maths, Computer Science, Law, Religious Studies, Media Studies, English Language, Physical Education, Design & Technology, Spanish, Film Studies, Drama, English Language and Literature, other modern languages.

Key subjects by field of study

Medicine, dentistry, veterinary science

→ **Chemistry**, often biology

Engineering

→ **Maths + physics**, Further Maths valued

Computer science, mathematics

→ **Maths**, often Further Maths

Economics, business

→ **Maths** for economics on demanding courses;
Economics A-level is a plus, rarely required.
Business: few requirements, maths valued

Languages, history, literature

→ **The subject itself**

General trends; exact requirements vary from one institution to another and should be checked at source.

Skills developed

In-depth analysis

Reasoned writing

Problem solving

Independent work

Research (EPQ)

Experimental method

Time management over two years

o6

Assessment and certification

One grade per subject, no overall grade. Students obtain "A-levels", not a single diploma.

A*

A

B

C

D

E

U

A* and A = top grades · E = minimum pass · U = fail

Exams vs coursework

Maths, sciences, economics

Exams 100%

History, geography, literature, computer science

Exams ~80%

~20%

Sciences: a practical endorsement, reported separately as pass or not.

Calendar



May – June

Main session, end of Year 13



Mid-August

Results, on the same day nationwide



January or June

Unit resits in international versions

What are predicted grades?

Applications for higher education go out in Year 13, before the final exams. Teachers therefore estimate the grade each student should achieve in each subject: this is the predicted grade. Offers are based on it and are conditional: a place is only confirmed if the actual results in August reach the required level.

End of Year 12

Internal exams and the year's work

Predicted grade

Set by teachers, subject by subject

Autumn, Y13

Applications on these grades

Offer

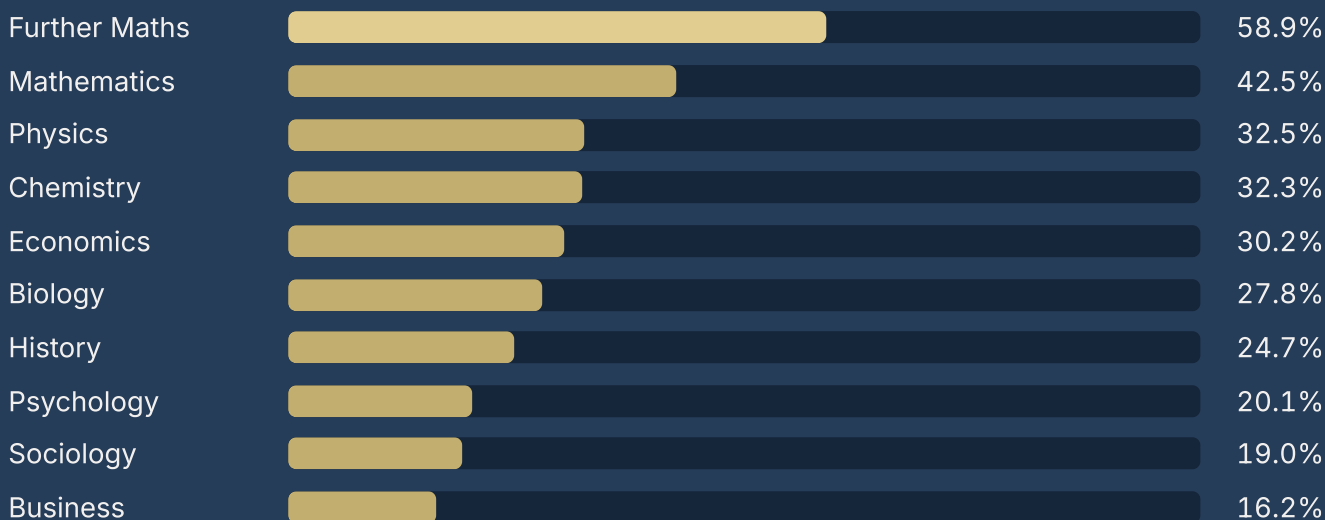
Conditional, e.g. "AAB"

August

Actual results confirm it, or not

Not all subjects award the same grades

Share of A* and A grades by subject, UK, 2026



This is not pure difficulty: Further Maths mainly attracts students who are very strong in maths.

07

International recognition

Recognised worldwide, but not everywhere on the same terms.

Direct access

United Kingdom

The native format of British universities.

Conditional

Switzerland

At least three A-levels with minimum grades, including maths or a science, and six general-education areas covered together with the IGCSEs, including a second language.

Direct access

United States

Well recognised, sometimes credited towards university courses.

Variable

Continental Europe

Each country has its own rules, often with a breadth requirement as in Switzerland.

In Switzerland

Schools mainly offer the Cambridge International or Pearson Edexcel International versions.

Language

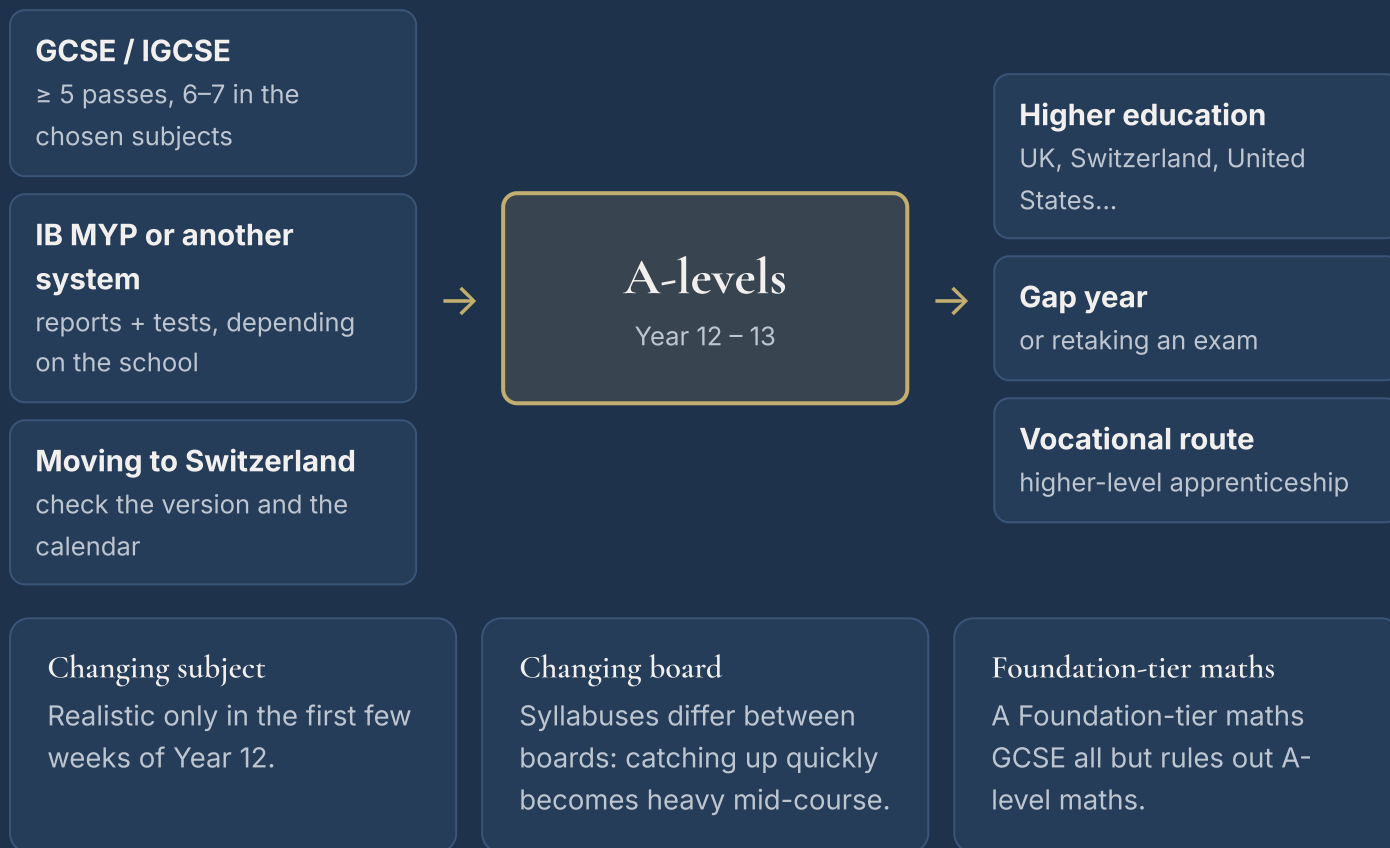
Everything is in English: a non-native speaker must be comfortable in written English from Year 12.

Mobility

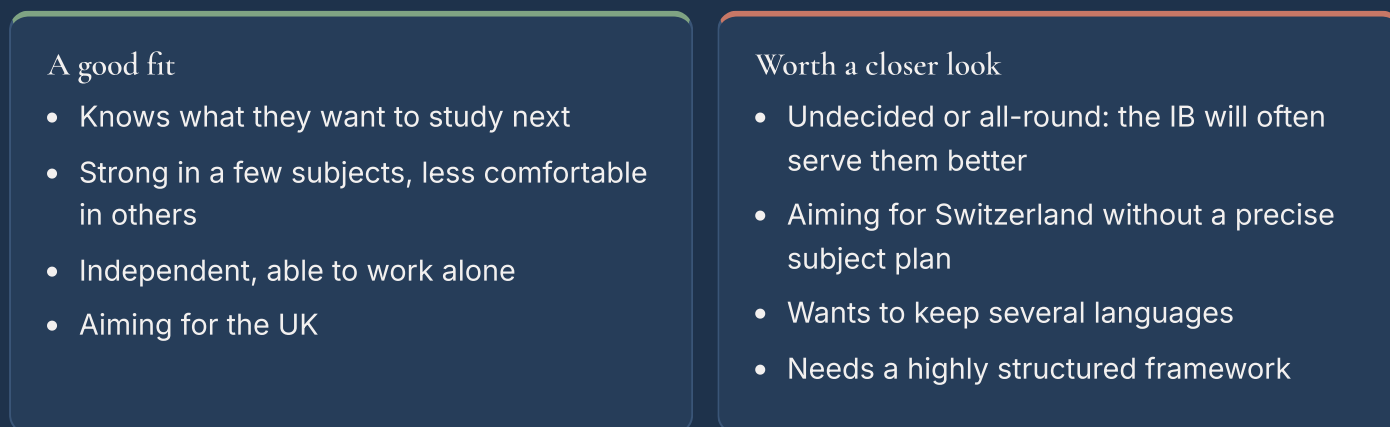
International versions make a move easier: the same boards worldwide.

Entry routes and transitions

Students almost always start A-levels after GCSEs or IGCSEs; other entry routes are possible, on application.



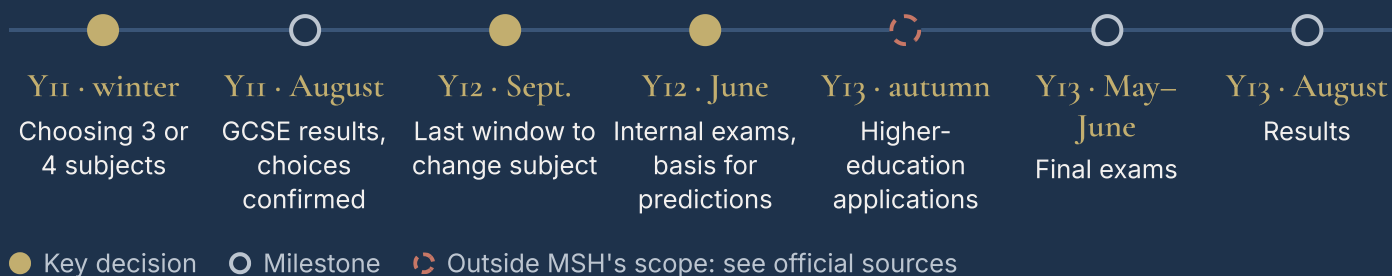
Which student profile?



A simple rule: the intended destination decides the programme, not the other way round. Destination unknown → the IB remains the safest option.

Decision timeline

Decisions come early, often before A-levels have even begun.



What really makes the difference

What families often discover too late.

I

Predicted grades matter more than final grades

Applications go out in Year 13 on the grades the school predicts, not the results (see section 06).

WHEN TO ACT

From Year 12

ASK THE SCHOOL

How do you set predictions?

2

Three subjects, each carrying a third of the weight

A subject that goes badly weighs heavily, and changing is only possible in the first few weeks.

WHEN TO ACT

Before Year 12

ASK THE SCHOOL

Can a student start with 4 subjects, then drop one?

3

Switzerland requires breadth

Without a second language or a science covered by the IGCSEs or A-levels, access to Swiss universities becomes harder.

WHEN TO ACT

When choosing IGCSEs

ASK THE SCHOOL

Which combinations cover the six areas?

4

The version offered changes the margin for error

Linear: everything is decided at the end. Modular: some papers count from Year 12, but units can be resat.

WHEN TO ACT

When choosing the school

ASK THE SCHOOL

Which board and which version, subject by subject?

5

An “easy” combination can backfire

A* and A rates vary sharply by subject, and selective institutions know it.

WHEN TO ACT

When choosing subjects

ASK THE SCHOOL

What are your results by subject over three years?

12

Summary and comparison

	A-levels	IB Diploma	French Bac	Swiss Matura	High School Diploma
Length	2 years	2 years	3 years of lycée	3 to 4 years	4 years
Subjects	3, freely chosen	6 + TOK, EE, CAS	Core + 2 specialisms	About ten + options	Credits, often + AP
Core curriculum	None	Yes, broad	Yes	Yes, very broad	Yes, varies
Assessment	Final exams	Exams + internal assessment	Continuous assessment + exams	Exams + annual grades	Continuous assessment
Grading	A* to E per subject	Out of 45	Out of 20	Out of 6	GPA
Specialisation	●●●●●	●●●●●	●●●●●	●●●●●	●●●●●
Access to Swiss universities	Conditional	Conditional	Direct	Direct	With APs

Simplified overview; each programme has its own detailed guide.

MyStudentHub study method

Succeeding at A-levels is first about steady effort over two years, without leaving everything until Year 13.

Y12 · first term Get into the rhythm: revision notes from week one	Y12 · end of year Take internal exams seriously: they underpin predictions	Y13 · autumn–winter Finish coursework early, practise past papers regularly	Y13 · spring Revise through exam questions, under real conditions
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A typical week of independent study

Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
Review the day's lessons	Exercises, subject 1	Exercises, subject 2	Exercises, subject 3	Essay or extended task	One timed past paper	Review and plan the week

Three habits that pay off

Test yourself rather than reread; space out revision of the same topic; work in short, phone-free blocks of focus. This is the approach MSH Focus supports day to day.

Disclaimer: these study tips are general guidance based on recognised learning practices; they do not stem from an individual assessment of the student. They should be adapted to each student's pace and to the school's instructions, and do not replace the advice of a teacher or specialist in the case of learning difficulties. MSH Focus is part of the MyStudentHub ecosystem, to which MSH Advisory also belongs.

Sources and updates

2026 figures: JCQ results published on 13 August 2026. Version 2, guide verified in October 2026; points marked "To verify" will be checked before each update.

- [A-level results 2026 by subject, all UK boards \(JCQ source\)](#)
- [A-level results 2026: pass rates and entries](#)
- [A-level results 2026: results by subject \(tutor2u\)](#)
- [JCQ: exam results data](#)
- Admission requirements for Swiss universities: [swissuniversities](#), to be checked case by case

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