

Teens Buzz

Choosing the right subject combination

Choice of subject combination is often the first academic choice that seems to shape and influence university and career options. Whether the choice is sciences or arts, educators advise that choosing wisely should be less about following trends.

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Separate passion from pressure
While parental guidance is valuable, you must also consider your own abilities. A forced combination can lead to poor performance.

Peer influence: If most friends are taking a certain combination, it can feel uncomfortable to choose differently. But academic decisions are personal. A friend may excel in Biology while you struggle. Copying their path does not guarantee the same outcome.

Ask specific questions. Am I strong enough to handle this subject? What areas do I need to improve? Would you recommend this combination for me? Arinaitwe advises.

By the time Senior Four vacation ends, the decision to choose subject combinations feels huge. Whether the choice is Sciences or Arts, it is often the first academic choice that seems to shape the next few years and even influence university and career options.

Yet, at times the decision is rushed. Peer influence, parental expectations, or simply the prestige attached to certain subjects often outweigh personal interests or strengths.

Educators advise that choosing wisely should be less about following trends and more about understanding yourself, your strengths and the path you want to explore.

Why the choice matters

In Uganda's A-Level system, subject combinations determine eligibility for university courses. Physics, Chemistry, and Mathematics keep doors open for engineering and some technology courses, while Biology, Chemistry, and Mathematics position you for medicine, pharmacy, and other health sciences. Arts combinations such as Literature, History, and Economics prepare you for fields like law, social sciences and journalism.

"Every combination has its purpose," says Olanya David, a science teacher at Valley Springs Secondary School, Kireka.

"Students often underestimate the consequences of picking subjects based on what looks popular rather than what aligns with their abilities. Switching combinations later is not always easy, and it can affect both confidence and performance," Olanya shares.

For some students, the decision is personal and complex. Jane Atim, 17, a Senior Six Arts student at St. Adrian's High School, Mukono, recalls her dilemma. "I wanted Physics, Chemistry, and Biology because my parents said medicine is a safe career. But I struggled with Chemistry in Senior Three. I had to think hard about whether I could handle it at A-Level."

Meanwhile, Brian Okello, a student at the same school, chose Literature, History, and Economics. "Some friends laughed when I picked arts subjects. They said it would not lead anywhere. But I enjoy reading and writing, and I feel more confident with these subjects," he explains.

Start with

self-awareness

Grace Nabatanzi, an arts teacher at Citylight Progressive School, Kungu notes that the first step is reflection. Before making the final decision, students should look inward.

Which subjects come naturally? Where do you consistently perform well without feeling forced. What subjects spark curiosity beyond exams.

"I advise students to identify their strengths early," says Nabatanzi. "For instance, students passionate about writing or history should not force themselves into sciences just because it looks prestigious. Enjoyment and competence often go hand in hand."

A student who enjoys solving numerical problems and understands abstract concepts may thrive in

MAKING THE FINAL DECISION

Before your final choice you should pause, review academic performance, reflect on genuine interests, consider and then decide with confidence.

For Okello, the choice has already made a difference. "I feel motivated every day because I like what I study," he says.

For Atim, careful consideration gave her clarity. "I do not regret my decision, and I feel confident I can succeed."

"Doubt is normal. No choice comes with a full guarantee. The goal is not perfection. It is informed decision-making. The key is to choose subjects that excite and challenge you, then commit fully," Nabatanzi recommends.

Mathematics and Physics. Another who loves debate, writing and analysing society may do better in History, Literature or Economics.

"Performance history matters. If a student has struggled with Chemistry from Senior One to Senior Three, choosing a pure science combination simply because it is admired may lead to frustration. Strength is not just about high marks in one term. It is about consistent ability and interest," Nabatanzi explains.

Research career pathways early

Olanya recommends that students explore requirements for university courses they may want to pursue early enough. Career guidance teachers can help interpret these requirements. So can older siblings, teachers and professionals already in the field.

"If you dream of civil engineering, Physics and Mathematics are non-negotiable," says Olanya. "Similarly, aspiring doctors must choose the right combination of Biology, Chemistry, and Mathematics. A future journalist may combine Literature, History, Economics or Entrepreneurship."

You may not have a fixed career plan at 15 or 16. If uncertain, consider combinations that keep multiple doors open.

"Mathematics and Economics, for example, can lead to finance, business, statistics, or development studies. Biology and Geography may support environmental science, agriculture, or public health," Olanya says. While subject combina-

tions influence university options, Nabatanzi notes that they do not necessarily define you.

"Bridging courses, diplomas and alternative pathways exist. Nonetheless, it is wiser to minimise the need for such adjustments by thinking carefully from the start," she says.

Flexibility should not mean taking subjects you dislike. Nabatanzi stresses, "Students sometimes pick subjects just to keep options open, without enjoying any of them. That is a recipe for poor performance."

Understand subject demands

Each subject has unique workloads and assessment styles. Sciences involve experiments and calculations, Literature requires reading and critical writing, History demands memorisation and analytical essays, and Fine Art involves creativity and practical projects.

"If you enjoy laboratory work and problem-solving, sciences can be fulfilling," Olanya shares. "If you thrive on debate, storytelling, and analysis, arts subjects may be a better fit. There is no one superior path." Inquiring from teachers about the realities of each subject at Advanced Level is crucial. The jump from O-Level to A-Level is significant. A subject that felt manageable before may become more demanding.

"Consider subject combinations as a whole. Taking three heavy science subjects requires strong time management and discipline. Mixing practical and essay-based subjects may offer balance for some learners," Nabatanzi explains.

Some subject combinations may require additional materials. Sciences often involve lab fees. Fine Art may require art supplies. It is important to discuss practical considerations with guardians.

"This conversation should not discourage ambition. Rather, it ensures that choices are realistic and sustainable throughout the two years of Advanced Level," Olanya advises.

Think beyond stereotypes

Science subjects are often labelled superior; arts are seen as easier. These stereotypes mislead. Every field contributes to society. All professionals here play vital roles. Arinaitwe Paul, Deputy Headteacher at Valley Springs Secondary School, Kireka, says:

"Students who choose subjects aligned with their strengths often outperform those chasing status."

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