

# Room for improvement

Work with your sixth-former to help them achieve the desired grades, says **Paul Bray**

For most young people with their sights set on university, two or three A-levels – or an equivalent qualification – are an absolute necessity. So whether your child has not yet chosen A-level subjects or will be approaching final revision in 2012, getting the right grades will be a crucial stepping stone to future success.

For the undecided, it is worth noting that holding a GCSE in a subject is not always a prerequisite to taking it up at A-level (history or geography, for example). But if your child already has an idea of what they want to study at university, you need to ensure that their A-levels are leading them in the right direction and – more importantly – not closing any doors to the best universities. My daughter, for instance, was surprised to be told by one institution that she could not apply to read chemistry because she was not taking A-level biology, even though she was doing chemistry, maths and physics.

"A lot of students are locking themselves out of top universities by making the wrong A-level choices," said Sir Peter Lampl, chairman of the Sutton Trust, speaking on BBC Radio 4's *Today* on July 8. The charity aims to promote social mobility through education, and its recent report highlighted the fact that five top independent schools send more pupils to Oxford and Cambridge than 2,000 other comprehensives or six different colleges combined, as reported in *The Daily Telegraph* the same day.

But the figures also obscure an important fact. Prof Michael Arthur, chairman of the Russell Group, which represents 20 top universities, explains: "The report concentrates on the tariff points in the Ucas system, not the A-levels themselves."

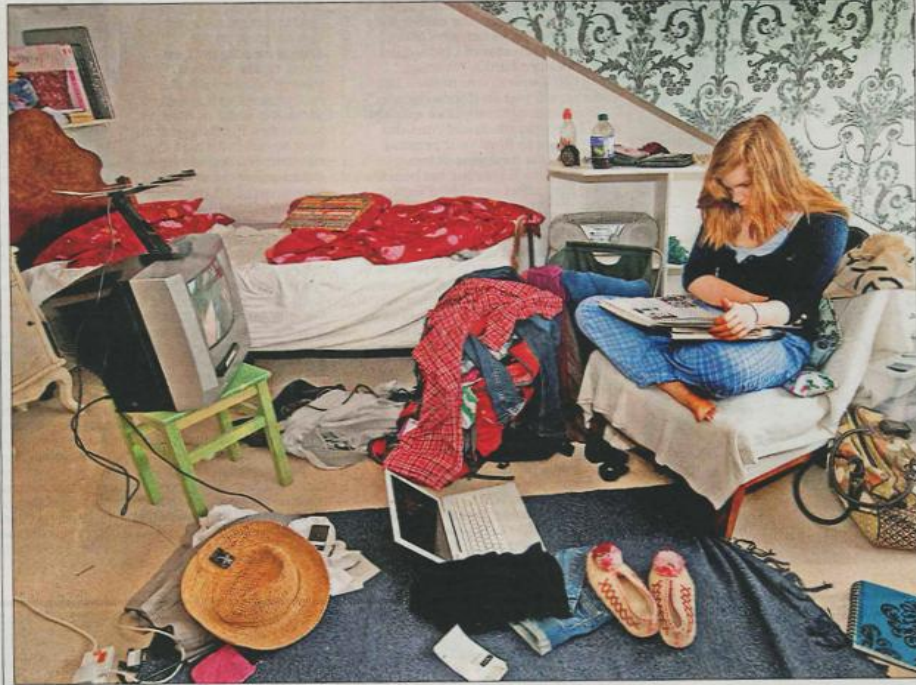
Picking the wrong subjects will restrict university course options regardless of exam results, so help your child make an informed choice.

## » ON COURSE

Once embarked on their A-level studies, students need to knuckle down early, says Anne Waterman, senior consultant, higher education and careers, at Gabbitas Education. "Parents need to encourage their children from the very beginning of their A-level course, because universities make offers on the basis of AS-levels [taken during Year 12] as well as GCSEs."

Excessive nagging can be counter-productive, but parents should not be afraid to get involved with sixth-formers' education, says Pat Hunter, head teacher of Rossett School, a mixed state secondary in Harrogate, North Yorkshire. "You have to keep giving them a guiding hand – cajoling them in a supportive and constructive way."

Hunter strongly recommends that A-level students do four hours' weekly private study for every subject, in addition to their regular homework, which should be spent reading around the subject and doing further research to underpin what they've learnt in class. Employing time-management skills is also crucial, as sixth-formers have more free periods and must discipline themselves to meet coursework deadlines. To achieve this, Hunter also advises limiting paid work to a maximum of 10 hours a week.



**New order: hopefully your grumpy teenager will be grateful for any study advice you offer**

Coursework is a perennial dilemma. "It's supposed to be the student's own work, and there's a fine line between helping them and doing it for them," says Waterman. She suggests waiting until they ask for help, and then following a teacher's example: pointing out basic errors, suggesting rewrites of anything that's unclear, and recommending extra sources to explore ideas the student may have missed.

Showing your support by acting as a sounding board can be useful at any time during your child's studies, according to Hunter (whether or not you fully understand what they're saying). Keep lines of communication open with the school – good schools will also give parents regular feedback about students' progress, but if you have concerns it is always worth raising them with teachers, preferably with your child's knowledge. Those who know they are struggling often welcome the intervention.

If you can afford one, a private tutor can offer real advantages, says Waterman. Although help of this kind is most beneficial for struggling students, even high-fliers, may be able to boost an A grade to the A\* they need for Oxbridge or medical school. But many schools offer extra tuition at lunchtimes or after school, so make sure you are not paying for something your son or daughter could be getting for free.

## » REVISION, REVISION, REVISION

When it comes to exams, everyone has their preferred revision technique, but there are books that suggest various methods. About six weeks before the exams, revision should begin in earnest, and parents can help students draw up their all-important revision programme.

This is the time when nerves may start to fray. "Some students panic and get very stressed about exams," says Waterman. Becoming withdrawn or

behaving out of character can be tell-tale signs of stress, and serious cases will need professional advice. But most of simply have to accept that our children will become (even) more irritable and snappy at exam time, usually with the people they are closest to.

Revision should not be overdone, advises Dr Nerina Ramlakhan, sleep and energy coach at Capio Nightingale Hospital, an independent mental health hospital in London. "Our ability to concentrate runs in cycles of roughly 90 minutes, after which we cease to retain information. Even a five- or 10-minute break can help, so ensure your child gets up and moves around, eats fruit, or engages a different part of their brain, by juggling or perhaps doing yoga or Pilates, for example."

Resist playing the "bribe" game. Psychological studies suggest that financial incentives don't work. Praise or a fun activity are better ways to encourage and reward studious behaviour. Above all, provide a peace environment (which may also mean hiding your own anxieties) and relax any domestic responsibilities. "You may need to say to yourself, 'I'd rather they got good A-levels than had a tidy bedroom,'" advises Hunter.

On the day, all that parents can do make sure examinees are properly rested and fed, have everything they need (including a supply of water), arrive at school or college in plenty of time and wish them luck. Afterwards, resist the temptation to ask what grades they think they got. It's very hard to and they will already have had a detestable post-mortem with friends and teachers. Our daughter sat her A-levels this summer and we had to learn to distinguish between "Mmm" and "Erk". But whatever her grades, she knows she has our unflinching support.

## Mind the gap: aim for a structured approach

Taking a gap year before (or after) university offers enticing prospects. Travel broadens the mind, volunteering the heart, employment the wallet, and all can help increase potential employability.

"Graduate employers look favourably on organised, structured gap years," says Chris Slay, managing director of recruitment specialist Skills Provision. "They offer young people a chance to strengthen their 'soft skills', such as decision-making, relationship-building, problem-solving and teamwork. Gap-year experiences also give them something to talk about in interviews."

Slay spent his gap year in America – fruit picking, working on building sites and selling second-hand cars in



**Time out: broaden those horizons**

downtown San Francisco – and "wouldn't have missed it for the world".

There are some caveats, though. While universities are generally supportive, tutors of some courses, such as mathematics and art, discourage gap years as they fear students will go "off the boil". And a gap year can prove almost too successful. I spent mine as a volunteer for Save the Children in North Africa. I had a terrific time, but when I got to university, writing essays on the Venerable Bede paled in comparison and I never really settled back into studying. For more information about gap year opportunities, benefits and costs, visit [www.telegraph.co.uk/education](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education) and [www.prospects.ac.uk/gap\\_year.htm](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/gap_year.htm)