

How advice based on a misunderstanding of the idea of ‘facilitating subjects’ can disadvantage students applying for University

The term ‘facilitating subjects’ has become familiar over recent years in schools around the country. The Russell Group introduced the term in its annual publication, “Informed Choices”¹ in an attempt to help students understand that for certain degree courses, particularly the sciences, specific A level subjects are required for admission. For example, if a student wants to study Engineering, Mathematics and usually Physics ‘A’ level would usually be required, if the choice is Bio-chemistry, then Chemistry is usually required. So if a student does not know what they want to do at University, then the argument is that they are best advised to choose one or more of the facilitating subjects in their choices at A level to ‘keep their options open’; just in case they ‘need’ one of these subjects later on.

Distortion by numbers

However, the list of the facilitating subjects is distorted by the sheer volume of degrees on offer in certain subject areas, especially in the field of (STEM) science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Even though the Russell Group document and helpful video² explains the limitations of prioritising facilitating subjects, the fact remains, that on a very crude level, if a student does take these subjects then they will have left their options open to study a greater number of different courses, since there are more courses that require these subjects for entry. As the Russell Group explains,

*“There are some advanced subjects which provide suitable preparations for entry to University generally, but which we do not include within the facilitating subjects, because there are relatively few degree programmes where an advanced level qualification in these subjects would be a requirement for entry. Examples of such subject include Economics, **Religious Studies** and Welsh.”*

The practice of requiring specific subjects for entry does not apply to many other fields such as accountancy, anthropology, History of Art, Law, Philosophy, Politics, Psychology, Religious Studies, Sociology, Theology and so on.

Are people being misled by politicians?

Sadly, some politicians, keen to promote the limited list of subjects in the EBacc as academically elite, have chosen to make statements which distort the message of ‘Informed Choices’. Elizabeth Truss, the Education Minister, said: “We want parents to be able to identify those schools and colleges where A-level pupils achieve great results in the key academic subjects that most often lead to the top universities.”ⁱ Even though this statement has been carefully worded so as to be technically true, the impression it creates is misleading. The phrase ‘most often lead’ can be read to describe the number of courses that require these subjects, but it is likely that people reading this statement would think it means these are group of subjects that are superior to the rest.

Some Universities appear to have taken exception to the way that politicians are using the appeal of top universities to help drive their policies. A statement by the University of Oxford includes the following, “Reports in the media or speculation that Oxford has indicated a preference or requirements for candidates to have the English Baccalaureate are not accurate.”³ Likewise, several of the colleges of Cambridge

¹ <http://russellgroup.org/InformedChoices-latest.pdf>

² http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=ynH9SmxElI8

³ http://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate_courses/courses/courses_and_entrance_requirements/

University have chosen to publish lists of A levels which are regarded as acceptable preparation for entry. Religious Studies appears in the top level list of 'generally suitable Arts A levels'.⁴

Academic research shows that Religious Studies is a 'key academic subject'!

So what do the politicians mean when they say 'key academic subject'? Do they have evidence that Religious Studies is less challenging academically than other subject? Research from Durham University⁵ shows this is simply not the case. The research found that Religious Studies 'A' level is consistently ranked as more challenging than English for example which is a facilitating subject.

In February 2013 the DfE attempted to encourage schools to favour the 'facilitating subjects' by publishing a key stage 5 performance table ranking schools by the percentage of students achieving **three** A levels at grades AAB or higher in facilitating subjects which they said was aimed at "reflecting the subjects and grades most commonly required at Russell Group and other top universities".⁶ Again, the phrase 'most commonly required' and 'top universities' can easily create an impression of an elite group of subjects. The facts are that outside the sciences is not the norm for one specific A level to be required for entry to a degree course, even rarer for two to be required and unheard of for three A levels to be specified. So it is difficult to find a reason for the introduction of this measure, which is genuinely in the interests of individual students.

Worryingly, if a student who has an aptitude for Religious Studies is encouraged to study a facilitating subject rather than RS on the mistaken belief that it will help them gain admission to a top university, they are probably being misled or even worse, put at a disadvantage.

Incentivising schools to study 'facilitating subjects' in favour of Religious Studies may disadvantage some students

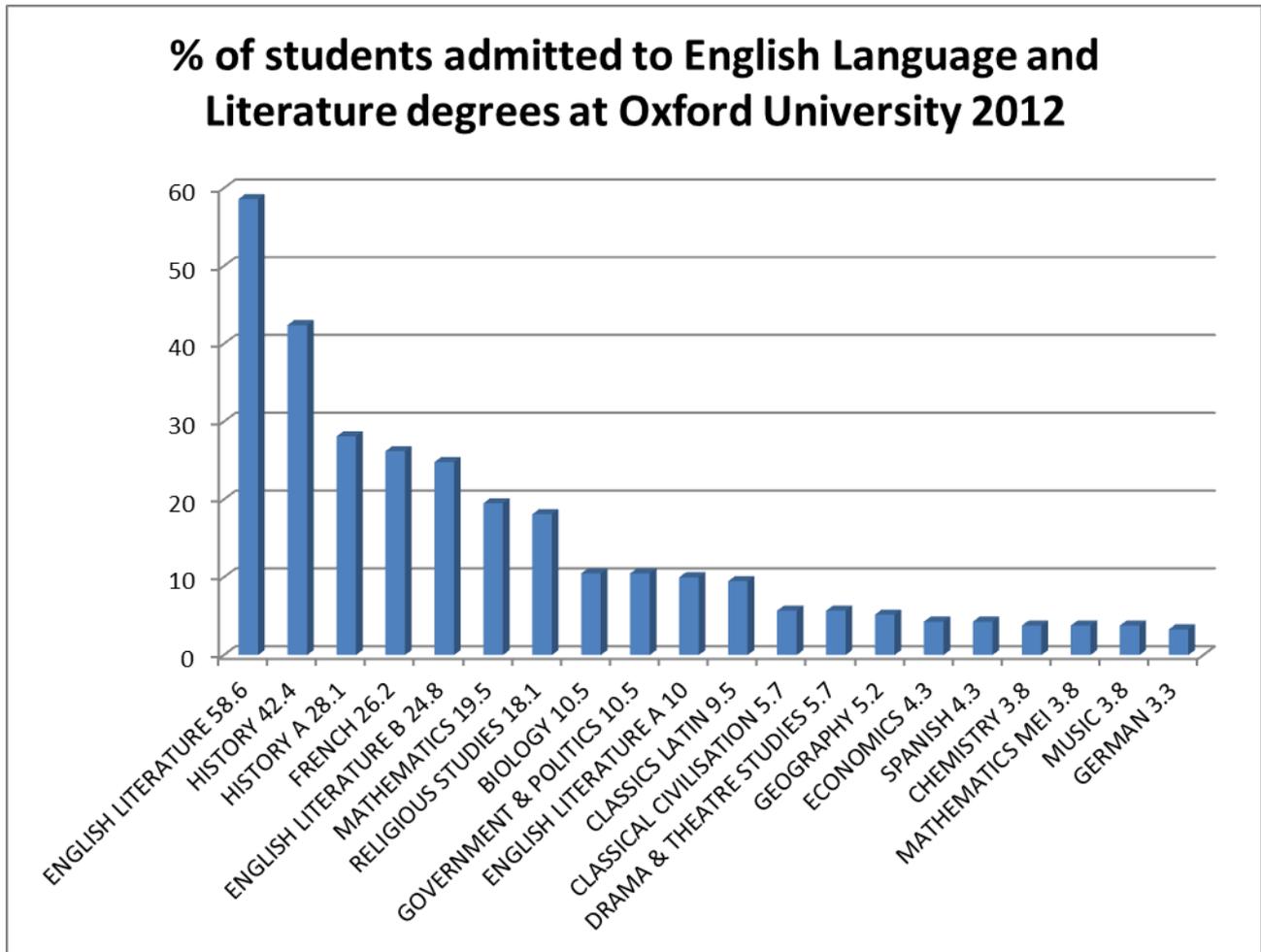
So if the DfE is acting in the best interests of students, you might expect those students who successfully applied to 'the top universities', to have studied 'facilitating subjects', especially those applying for admission for entry to degree courses in the 'facilitating subjects' themselves. The evidence suggests that this is not true.

⁴ <http://www.trin.cam.ac.uk/index.php?pageid=604>

⁵ <http://www.cem.org/attachments/SCORE2008report.pdf>

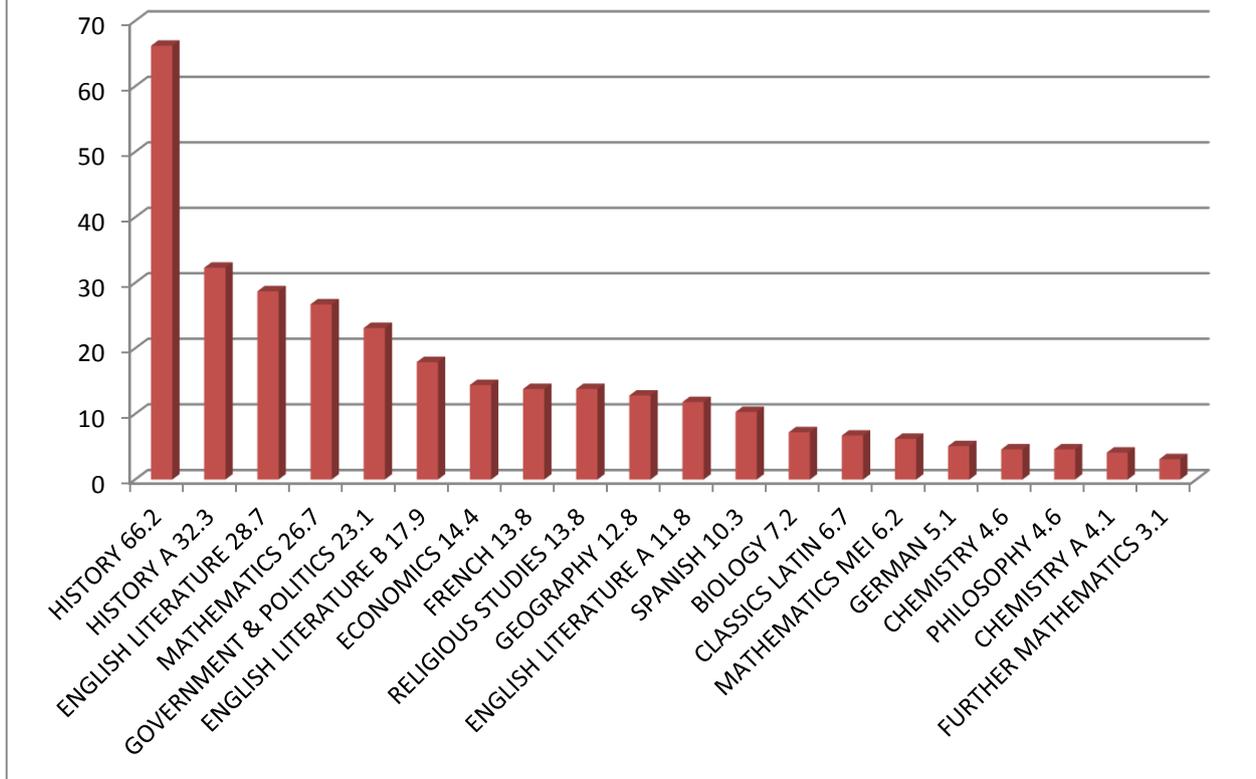
⁶ <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/performance/news.html>

The graph below shows the percentage of acceptances to the **English Language and Literature** degrees at Oxford University in 2012 from candidates who had studied 3 or more 'A' levels. It shows clearly that if a teacher had encouraged a student not to study RS in favour of a lower ranking 'facilitating subject', they would actually have reduced the chances of that student being admitted to the course. In fact, almost 1 in 5 of successful applicants did study Religious Studies at A level. So for this course, students who had studied Religious Studies were '*preferred*' over those who had studied some facilitating subjects

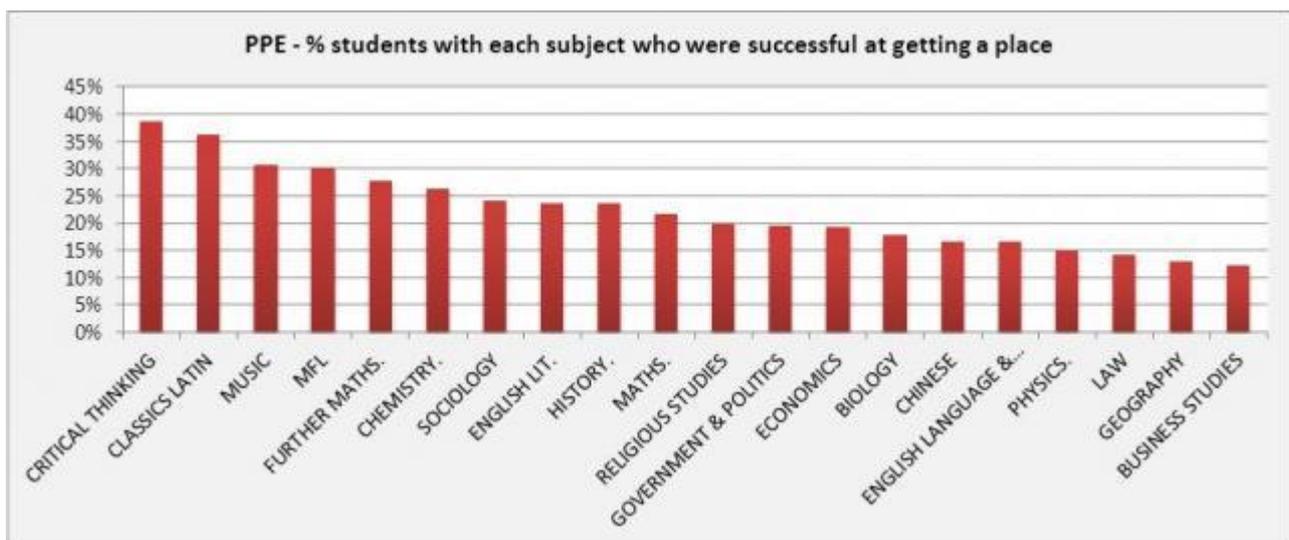


A similar message can be seen in the data for admission to **History degrees** at the same University (see next page). Applicants with Religious Studies 'A' level were more likely to gain admission to study History at Oxford than those with 'A' levels in many of the 'facilitating subjects':

% of students admitted to History degrees at Oxford University 2012



Laura McInerney demonstrates a similar trend for 2011 in her blog at www.lkmco.org/article/levels-make-you-successful-oxford-maths-ppe-03032013



In conclusion, teachers of Religious Education can be confident in asserting that 'A' level Religious Studies is highly valued by informed people in University admission departments and by employers. People who misrepresent the message of 'informed choices' would be wise to remember that as teachers, we will not stand idly by whilst the futures of our students is compromised.
