



What are the easiest Leaving Cert subjects?

Think you know the easy and the tough subjects? The dead certs and the sure fails? Our analysis of results over the past three years may change your mind

Subject choice is a tricky business. The Leaving Cert is such a highstakes exam, choosing the right subjects can be critical for success. Everyone gets involved and students are often bombarded by well-meaning advice from family and friends. “Don’t choose history. Geography is an easier A.” Or, “Go for home economics. It overlaps with biology, and sure those two subjects are easy.”

An analysis of grades awarded over the past three years turns much of the received wisdom on its head. Did you know that history students are more likely to get an A, B or C than geography students?

Music offers a much better prospect of an honour than home economics, while well over a quarter of higher-level students who do applied maths can expect to get an A. Two of the most feared subjects at higher level – Irish and maths – offer excellent prospects of getting an honour.

So what can we learn from all this? Be wary of well-meaning voices telling you what you should study. Instead, figure out what you enjoy and what you’re good at. You’ll be more inclined to study if you don’t dread doing a subject, and work is the key to results.

Consult your teachers and your guidance counsellor. If you have no idea what you want to do, make sure your choice of subjects gives you options at third level.

The results people get do make for interesting reading, however. It’s not a road map for success, but rather it’s a sometimes surprising analysis of how students have fared over the past three years.

The 10 ‘easiest’ honours

1 Music

Music students have consistently been the most likely to receive an A, B or C at higher level in their subject over the past three years. A huge 95 per cent of higher-level music students managed to get an honour.

The rate of As is also high, with between 14 and 18 per cent of higher-level students awarded an A2 or higher. The most awarded grade last year was a B2; 19 per cent of students managed that grade.

2 Irish

For all the grief it can cause, a bit of work at higher-level Irish can reap handsome rewards. It had a huge honours rate last year, when 87 per cent of students got an A, B or C. Irish always has a high honours rate but it has risen significantly over the past three years. The average A,B,C rate over the past three years is 84 per cent.

Last year, 17 per cent of students were awarded an A2 or higher. A-rates in previous years have been lower, at 12 per cent in 2010 and 14 per cent in the following year, but they are still high.

3 Technology

It's not a particularly well-known subject – fewer than 800 students sat the higher-level paper last year – but technology can be a wise choice if the results are to be believed. Overall, 82 per cent of the students who sat the higher-level paper over the past three years got an honour, while the A rate was a respectable 16 per cent last year.

4 Spanish

Just over 2,500 students studied Spanish at higher level last year – French and German are much more popular – but it paid off; 83 per cent of those managed an honour, while the three-year honours rate is 82 per cent.

Last year, 15 per cent of students were awarded an A1. Spanish is increasing in popularity and both the A and honours rates have remained consistent over the past three years.

5 Maths

Here's a surprise. The much-maligned higher-level maths actually enjoys one of the highest honours rates of all subjects. This fact, plus the bonus points now on offer, means that higher-level maths is expected to increase in popularity over the coming years.

Four out of five higher-level maths students achieved an honour over the past three years. The honours rate has been rising; it was 78 per cent in 2010 and rose to 84 per cent last year. It's still a reasonably difficult subject in which to get an A, with just under 10 per cent of students managing at least an A2 last year. A B3 was the grade awarded to the highest proportion of students last year; just over 14 per cent managed that.

6 Design and communication graphics

Of the almost 4,000 higher-level students in this subject, 84 per cent got an honour last year. The three-year average A,B,C rate is 81 per cent and 14 per cent of students were awarded an A last year.

7 Art

Students are highly likely to get an honour, but A grades are thin on the ground. Over the past three years 79 per cent of higher level students have been awarded an A, B or C grade. Students are least likely to get an A in art, however, with just 1 per cent of students achieving an A1, and a further 4 per cent being awarded an A2 last year. The grade awarded to most students was a C1, with 15 per cent of students making that grade.

8 German

The second most popular European Leaving Cert language has had a 79 per cent honours rate over the past three years. 2012 had the lowest honours rate with 77 per cent of students getting an A, B or C grade last year, down from 81 per cent in 2011. Last year, 15 per cent of students got at least an A2 in the exam.

9 History

History is often regarded as one of the more difficult subjects in which to do well at higher

level. In fact, 78 per cent of students have been awarded an A, B or C in the past three years and 12 per cent of students managed to achieve an A2 or higher in 2012. The A1 rate was six per cent.

10 Accounting

Accounting has the highest honours rate of the three business subjects with 78 per cent of students managing a C3 or higher in the subject over the past three years. A large proportion of these students were awarded As. Last year, 21 per cent of higher-level students achieved an A2 or higher. NOTE: Subjects that have an exam cohort of fewer than 1,000 students were not included in this analysis.

The 10 'toughest' subjects

1 Agricultural science

Often seen as a good prospect for those wishing to do a subject in a single year. Students need to work hard, however, as onethird of higher-level students haven't managed an honour over the past three years. Last year, the honours rate was 66 per cent. A respectable 10 per cent of students achieved an A2 or higher last year.

2 Classical studies

Another minority subject with 628 higher level sits last year when the honours rate was a very respectable 76 per cent, but this is quite a bit higher than in previous years. In 2012, 69 per cent of students got an A, B or C at higher level. Ten per cent managed to get an A last year; a relatively low proportion when compared with other subjects.

3 Biology

By far the most popular of the sciences, biology is sometimes seen as an easy option. While the A rate – 17 per cent last year – is relatively high, the subject has a low honours rate of 71 per cent over three years and 22 per cent were awarded a D at higher level last year, while 9 per cent failed.

4 Business

By far the most popular of the business subjects, with 71 per cent of students managing an honour. Of the almost 12,000 students who sat the subject at higher level in 2012, 11 per cent achieved an A2 or higher, while 22 per cent passed the subject but didn't make the C3 grade.

5 Economics

With almost 4,000 students sitting the subject at higher level last year, economics is just behind accounting in the popularity stakes. Since 2010, 73 per cent of higher level students have managed to get an A, B or C in the subject. Almost 12 per cent of students achieved an A in 2012. The failure rate in economics was six per cent, while 22 per cent of students were awarded a D.

6 Physics

While the honours rate in higher-level physics is relatively low, at 74 per cent, the A rate is enormous. Almost 20 per cent of higher-level students achieved an A2 or higher in the subject last year. Seven per cent of students failed last year, while 18 per cent passed the subject but didn't manage to get an honour.

7 French

By far the most popular foreign language, with almost 14,000 students sitting the higher-level exam last year. Three quarters of those students achieved an A, B or C grade. The three-year honours average is only marginally below that figure at 74 per cent. Just under 14 per cent achieved an A grade in 2012 with 22 per cent of students awarded a D. Failure rates were low, with just 3 per cent of students falling short last year.

8 Chemistry

A quarter of higher-level chemistry student failed to get an honour in the past three years. With almost 7,000 students, chemistry is the second most popular science subjects. Like physics, the A rate is high. 20 per cent of students in 2012 managed an A with almost 12 per cent of the cohort achieving an A1. The failure rate for chemistry was 9 per cent last year, while 19 per cent of students got a D.

9 Geography

A very popular choice (more than 20,000 students took the higher-level paper last year); 76 per cent of students got an honour over the past three years. Eight per cent of higher-level students were awarded an A last year. The most awarded grade was C2 – 13 per cent got that while 23 per cent of students passed with a D grade. The failure rate is very low, at 3 per cent.

10 Home economics

Another subject often dogged by a perception that it is somehow an easy option. Statistics say otherwise, with less than 8 per cent of students getting an A in the subject at higher level. The three-year honours average is 76 per cent and 22 per cent of students got a D grade last year. Failure rates are low, at just 3 per cent.

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