

Should you go down the commerce path in A levels?



ILLUSTRATION: SYEDA AFRIN TARANNUM

ADRITA ZAIMA ISLAM & ARANYO RISHI CHOWDHURY

Making a decision as crucial as your academic track, something that will go on to define what you do professionally for the rest of your life, is a bit much to ask of a teenager with a barely developed prefrontal cortex. However, for students with an inclination towards the world of business and commerce, it is even more difficult to make this already tough choice.

Not only do parents and relatives pressure you into a more “prestigious” STEM track like engineering or medicine, but students these days tend to contribute to the problem. While the digs made at commerce students and their lighter coursework are usually not mean-spirited, it is not uncommon for people to have legitimate biases against people who go down the track.

“It’s hard to take myself seriously sometimes because a lot of my STEM peers look down on my field of study,” says Ahmed Junaed Karim, a 2023 A level graduate who took Accounting and Economics. “Sometimes they joke and sometimes they mean it but you hear it so much, sometimes you think: *Is it true? Am I a commerce student just because I wasn’t good at anything else?*”

Irrespective of your academic interests, when your peers make you feel insecure about your intelligence for choosing certain subjects, you wouldn’t want to choose them. Before jumping to conclusions about difficulty, it’s better to know what the commerce subjects actually teach, and whether or not they may actually be a better fit for you.

The most common choices are Accounting, Business, Economics, and Mathematics. The Mathematics components chosen are usually Pure Mathematics 1 and 3, along with Statistics 1 and 2. Economics isn’t included here due to it being more of a social science than either a STEM subject or a commerce subject, but it is usually grouped with the latter category nonetheless. Staying in the commerce track leads to careers in financial analysis, accounting, marketing, human resources, and, of course, entrepreneurship.

Starting with Accounting, it mainly teaches the interpretation and preparation of financial statements for different kinds of businesses, as well as internal decision-making. The coursework is relatively lighter than something like Physics or Economics, so it’s a safe option if you want good grades. However, the course might not be an accurate representation of the profession of chartered accountancy.

“The syllabus content is too focused on manual data entry and book-keeping, something that’s being automated anyway in the profession today” says

Ahmed. “The course hasn’t really evolved. It would be more interesting to explore how human behaviour relates to accounting, like in Economics. How, for example, as a chartered accountant you wouldn’t just have to do bookkeeping, but also evaluate the data to advise business-owners for better performance at the company.”

Thus, your performance in the subject may not necessarily indicate whether or not you’ll like being an accountant. If this career path is something you consider just because you get an A* in Accounting, it’s definitely recommended that you do personal research, listen to firsthand experiences, and then come to a conclusion about if it’s really for you.

A more go-to pick for A level commerce students is Business. From learning about economic factors affecting a business, to marketing strategies integral to its survival, to every type of management required to keep it running smoothly, the course covers a lot of ground for our level.

“I started off with a bunch of random work, from editing and writing small social media articles to interning for bigger projects such as the Matarbari Joint Venture Project.”

However, the course suffers from an overemphasis on rote-learning. “The commerce curriculum is heavy on memorisation and retention of information” says Fairuz Shams, an A level Business and Accounting student. “I imagine that’s kind of hard on students like me, who have difficulty focusing and retaining huge chunks of information. Accounting is relatively better, since it’s like Mathematics in terms of format. But Business is difficult due to this rote-learning aspect.”

In spite of this, STEM and commerce students unanimously agree that the commerce path is easier to cope with. While people rag on the track for not demanding as much effort or “intelligence”, at the end of the day, it’s the commerce students who get to make the most of their last high school years outside of the classroom. They have a lot of time leftover for leisurely activities, as well as other skills they might want to

develop outside of school, like programming, graphic design, or any other area.

Besides the better academics-leisure balance the track affords, the subject content is also more intuitive for many people. “After studying pure science for a whole year I knew I wanted to study something easier,” says Audri Ali, a 2024 A level graduate.

“I did a six-month trial period and shifted to commerce while keeping science as an option in case I didn’t like it. However, I ended up sticking to it because it just clicked better. I understood things in ways I could never understand science.”

One significant edge that commerce holds over science is the ease of access of extracurricular activities related to the field. Research internships at laboratories are often difficult to access without certain connections or paying your way to them.

With commerce, it’s easier to explore the field outside of the classroom due to the necessary skills being relatively easier to acquire. Whereas to intern at a laboratory you would need specialised skills in handling delicate equipment, there’s an abundance of small businesses that need people on marketing and management fronts. Landing such positions will give you a lot of experience, which you can use later to apply for posts at bigger enterprises.

“I started off with a bunch of random work, from editing and writing small social media articles to interning for bigger projects such as the Matarbari Joint Venture Project,” says Audri. “After working for free for four years, I’ve finally started getting paid work. I’m currently the Head of Marketing and Strategic Planning at Pizza da Wali, and an event and PR manager at Boiragee.”

Since these ECAs are seemingly a big time commitment, is it really worth it for you to pursue them? “They don’t really do much unless you’ve worked for a considerable amount of time. However, you can only understand the dynamics of a working environment if money is involved. So they do prepare you better than having zero experience,” Audri added.

It’s not necessarily impossible to shift to the commerce track after having completed your A levels in the sciences. However, the sooner you have yourself figured out to a decent extent, the better off you’ll be. Feeling like you made the right choice can really help you live your final school years to the fullest, and the only way to do that is to explore every track available and see what truly works for you.

Zaima and Rishi are fresh highschool graduates still reeling from A level trauma.