



Post-16 Education – A Guide for Teachers and Parents

This resource is aimed at teachers and parents who would like a better idea of the options available to students as they finish their GCSEs. Use this resource to help inform students about their options and support them in finding the route that is right for them. The information below is primarily targeted at those living in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Scottish system is broadly similar and some details are described here (to support pupils who have the option of studying there). However, if you work in Scotland, it is worth looking for Scotland-specific information.

This is an introduction to the post-16 routes available to students and their structures. For more detailed, local information – particularly regarding available courses and entry requirements – it is important to contact local employers and education providers.

Levels

English, Welsh and Northern Irish Qualifications are divided into levels, from Entry Level to Level 8. The table below shows example qualifications available at each level. Although all qualifications at a single level are broadly equivalent, they are not equal – for example, A levels and AS levels are both Level 3 qualifications. It is important that students check with institutions how they value their qualifications before applying.

Level	Selected Qualifications
Entry Level	Entry Level Awards Skills for Life Entry level English for Speakers of Other Languages
Level 1	GCSE grade 1–3 (G–D in Wales) Level 1 NVQ Music grades 1–3
Level 2	GCSE grade 4–9 (A*–C in Wales) Level 2 NVQ BTEC First Diploma Intermediate Apprenticeship Music grades 4–5
Level 3	A level AS level Level 3 NVQ BTEC National Diploma Advanced Apprenticeship Essential Skills for Wales (ESW) Music grades 6–8



Level 4	Roughly equivalent to one year of university Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE) Level 4 NVQ BTEC Higher National Certificate Higher Apprenticeship
Level 5	Roughly equivalent to two years of university Foundation Degree Diploma of Higher Education (DipHE) Level 5 NVQ BTEC Higher National Diploma
Level 6	Bachelor's Degree (with or without honours) Degree Apprenticeship
Level 7	Degree with integrated master's Master's Degree Postgraduate Certificate/Diploma (e.g., PGCE)
Level 8	Doctorate (PhD or DPhil)

A Levels/Scottish Highers

A levels are level 3 qualifications, usually taken after GCSEs and available in a range of subjects. A full A level is studied over two years, divided into the AS year (the first year of the qualification, usually studied in year 12) and the A2 year (the second year of the qualification, usually studied in year 13). Students have the option to study a subject for a year, and receive an AS level qualification, or to continue for two years and receive a full A level. Students typically study for three full A levels, and university offers are often based on three A level results, although taking four subjects in year 12 and dropping one in year 13 is also common.

Requirements to study A levels vary between institutions and subjects but tend to be at least 5 GCSEs from 9–4/A*–C (including English and maths). If the A level subject is commonly available at GCSE, it is also likely to be a requirement.

A levels can be studied at secondary schools which have sixth forms, sixth form colleges or further education colleges. They are the most common option for students looking to study at university, but are also a good way for students to keep their options open.

Some students will have the option to study Scottish Highers. Students study 'Highers' in the first year of sixth form, and can continue on to 'Advanced Highers' in the second year. A higher can earn more UCAS points than the equivalent AS level grade, while an advanced higher earns the same amount as the equivalent A level grade. Other than this and the location, an A level and an advanced higher are broadly similar, although A levels offer more subject options.



International Baccalaureate

The International Baccalaureate is an international qualification, studied by around 150 000 students globally across 2500 schools, with around 5000 of those students in the UK.

Like A levels, the IB is a two-year course. It includes three compulsory subjects ('Theory of knowledge', 'The extended essay' and 'Creativity, activity, service') which aim to teach students how to effectively learn and apply their knowledge. Alongside that, students choose one subject from each of six groups: 'Studies in language and literature', 'Language acquisition', 'Individuals and societies', 'Sciences', 'Mathematics' and 'The arts', with the option to drop 'The arts' category in favour of a subject from another category. Students choose 3 or 4 subjects to study at higher level, in more detail, while the rest are studied at standard level. Subjects are graded from 1 (low) to 7 (high), with a grade 7 higher level subject receiving the same UCAS points as an A* at A level, and a grade 7 standard subject receiving the same UCAS points as an A* at AS level, although grades 1 and 2 receive no UCAS points. Smaller numbers of points are available for 'Theory of Knowledge' and the extended essay.

The option to study six subjects can give students a greater breadth of knowledge. Both IBs and A levels are equally valued by universities.

BTECs

BTECs are vocational courses aimed at a particular sector of industry, although not necessarily at a particular job.

BTECs can be studied as BTEC Firsts, which are level 1 or 2 qualifications studied alongside, or instead of, GCSEs, or as post-16 qualifications.

As post-16 qualifications, BTECs are divided into a number of levels. It is very important, when supporting a student applying for a BTEC course, that they are applying for a course at the correct level.

- BTEC Level 1 (Introductory) – These are level 1 qualification equivalent to lower graded BTEC Firsts or GCSEs grade 1–3/G–D.
- BTEC Level 2 (Technicals) – These are level 2 qualifications equivalent to higher graded BTEC Firsts or GCSEs grade 4–9/A*–C.
- BTEC Level 3 (Nationals) – These are level 3 qualifications equivalent to one or more A levels.
- BTEC Higher Nationals – These are level 4 or 5 qualifications equivalent to the first or second years of a degree.

A BTEC National can result in a number of different qualifications, depending on the course – a National Award is equivalent to a single A level, a National Certificate is equivalent to two A levels and a National Diploma is equivalent to three A levels. Where a BTEC is equivalent to more than one A level, multiple grades are awarded (see the table on the following page for the possible combinations).

There are four grades available: pass (equivalent UCAS points to an E at A level); merit (equivalent UCAS points to a C at A level); distinction (equivalent UCAS points to an A at A level); or distinction* (equivalent UCAS points to an A* at A level).



Qualification	A Level Equivalent	Possible grades (Pass, Merit, Distinction)
National Award	1	P, M, D, D*
National Certificate	2	PP, MP, MM, DM, DD, D*D, D*D*
National Diploma	3	PPP, MPP, MMP, MMM, DMM, DDM, DDD, D*DD, D*D*D, D*D*D*

BTEC courses include core units based on the sector covered, and then a number of optional topics to allow students to choose the area of that sector that interests them. For example, a BTEC Diploma in Animal Management may include mandatory units on Animal Biology, Animal Welfare and Animal Health, but then allow students to specialise through optional units in Farm Livestock Husbandry, Aquatic Animal Husbandry or Exotic Animal Husbandry, among others. Some subjects may also include work experience.

BTEC requirements vary widely depending on the level and subject. However, BTEC Nationals tend to require at least 5 GCSE grades 9–4/A*–C, including English and maths (lower grades may be accepted for English or maths for some courses if the student resits the relevant GCSE). BTECs are usually taught at sixth form colleges or further education colleges.

BTECs are a good option for students who have a sector of industry in mind. Depending on the subject and level studied, they may allow students to enter industry as an employee or apprentice, to go on to university to study for a Foundation, Bachelor’s or Master’s degree, or to go on to further education through a BTEC Higher National Certificate/Diploma.

NVQ/SVQ

An NVQ (National Vocational Qualification) is a vocational qualification with a focus on practical skills required for a specific job. The SVQ (Scottish Vocational Qualification) is the Scottish equivalent, and is broadly similar.

NVQs do not involve exams, but instead require evidence to be provided showing competencies in specified skills – either through building up a portfolio or through observation by an assessor. As such, they are more flexible to fit around existing employment or responsibilities, and they do not necessarily need to be completed in a certain time. However, this also means that most NVQs are not run through schools or colleges, but require employment in the relevant role.

NVQs can be taken at a number of levels, with learners advancing through them as their skills develop, with school-leavers likely to take level 2 or level 3 courses. As many NVQs are not based at a college or institution, they may not have specific entry requirements. Level 3 courses usually require the completion of the level 2 course and college-based courses tend to require at least English and maths at Grade 9–4/A*–C, although students may be accepted with lower grades if they take extra English or maths courses. It is important to note that, for certain roles, an NVQ alone may not be sufficient to allow you to work in that occupation. Students may also require an apprenticeship, specific work experience or industry qualification and registration.



Apprenticeships

An apprenticeship is a job which also includes off-the-job training. Apprentices are paid for both their work and their training, and are usually expected to work at least 30 hours a week. At least 20% of these hours must be allocated to training, including time to top-up GCSE English or Maths grades if required. Businesses taking on apprentices work alongside a training provider – usually a local college or university – to provide off-the-job training and assessment.

A minimum wage is specified for apprenticeships, but this is often exceeded. The wage depends on the year of apprenticeship and the age of the apprentice. First year apprentices of any age are entitled to the Apprentice minimum wage, while other apprentices are entitled to relevant wage for their age-group. Apprentices are also owed holiday pay.

Apprentice	Minimum Wage (as of April 2020)
Apprentice under the age of 19	£4.15 an hour
First year apprentice aged 19 or over	£4.15 an hour
Non-first year apprentice aged 19–20	£6.45 an hour
Non-first year apprentice aged 21–24	£8.20 an hour
Non-first year apprentice aged 25+	£8.72 an hour

Apprentices can earn qualifications alongside their apprenticeships. These can include BTECs, NVQs, Certificates or Diplomas of Higher Education or university degrees, as well as industry-specific qualifications. The qualification available depends on the apprenticeship and its level.

Name	Level	Qualification Equivalent
Intermediate	2	5 GCSE grades 9–4/A*–C
Advanced	3	2 A level passes
Higher	4 or 5	Foundation Year, CertHE, DipHE
Degree	6 or 7	Bachelor’s or Master’s Degree

The requirements of an apprenticeship depend on the position and the level, although level 3 apprenticeships will require GCSE grades 9–4/A*–C, or equivalent, in English and maths (students who have not achieved these grades may be able to study them as part of their apprenticeship). Applications are usually made to the company themselves or via their training provider. Apprenticeships are a good option for students who have a clear idea where they want to work and are interested in earning while they study.

Students looking for an apprenticeship should start on the government apprenticeship website, <https://www.gov.uk/apply-apprenticeship>.



Traineeships

A traineeship is designed for students who want to move on to an apprenticeship or work, but don't yet have the skills or experience to be accepted. They are up to six months long, and offer work experience, support with finding a job and writing a CV, along with help catching up with English and maths. They are flexible programmes, with the length and level of support given depending on the needs of the trainee. Unlike apprenticeships they are unpaid.

They are not available to students who already have qualifications at level 3 or higher or already have a job. Most applications are via the employer – students looking for traineeships should go to the government website, <https://www.findapprenticeship.service.gov.uk/traineeshipsearch>.

