

The Parents' Guide to Post 16 Options

2024-2025

HIGHLIGHTS:

- A levels
- BTECs
- Apprenticeships
- The EPQ
- Other options

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Level	Qualification / educational routes				
8	Doctorate (PhD)		NVQ 8		
7	Masters degree (MA)		Degree apprenticeship / NVQ 5, 6, 7		
6	Bachelors degree BA or BSc				
5	Foundation degree FdA or FdSc	Higher National Diploma (HND)	Higher apprenticeship / NVQ 4		
4	Higher National Certificate (HNC)				
3	A levels Grades A-E	International Baccalaureate	T Levels	BTEC (extended) diploma BTEC certificate	Advanced apprenticeship / NVQ 3
2	GCSE Grades 4- 9 (C, B, A or A*)		BTEC first diploma	Intermediate apprenticeship / NVQ 2	
1	GCSE Grades 1- 3 (D,E,F or G)		Foundation diploma / entry level qualifications	Traineeship / NVQ 1	
	Academic route		Vocational route	Applied / work route	

Levels of Education

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland there are 8 qualification levels (1 - 8) plus an entry level qualification for those just starting. Generally, the higher the level, the more difficult the qualification is. Levels 1-3 are typically taught in schools and colleges.

With so many different qualifications, it can be hard to know what they mean and where they might lead to next. To help you understand, we've created a summary of what the levels mean highlighting academic, vocational and work-based routes to higher education.

A levels at a glance:

Qualification type

General Certificate of Advanced Level qualification

Type of learning

Mostly theory

Qualifications needed to sign up

At least 5 GCSEs grades 4 - 9 and at least a grade 5/6 in the subject/s chosen for A level (requirements may vary between schools)

Subject choices

Three subjects

Length of commitment

2 years full time

Tuition costs

Free (unless parents choose to pay privately)

UCAS points awarded for passing

56 points - A*
48 points - A
40 points - B
32 points - C
24 points - D
16 points - E

Can lead to

University, further study, training or work

A levels

An A level, or General Certificate of Advanced Level qualification, is an in-depth study of a subject over two years with an examination at the end to test knowledge. Learning mostly takes place in the classroom.

Students take three A levels, although some may take four. For students wishing to go on to university, UCAS points are awarded for up to three A levels. Points range from 16 to 56 points depending on the grade achieved. If a student takes four A levels, only their top three grades will count towards their total UCAS points.

Subject choices

There are many more subject choices at A level than GCSE, so it's

possible they might choose a subject they haven't studied before. If they find they don't enjoy the subject as much as they'd hoped, most schools or colleges allow them to make changes towards the end of the first term. Students usually need at least a GCSE grade 6 in their subject choice, if it's something they have studied before, although exceptions can be made.

AS levels

If your child chooses to study a subject for Y12 only, they can take an examination and obtain an AS level which counts as 40% of an A level. AS levels count towards UCAS points, ranging from 20 points (A grade) through 6 points (E grade), although not all schools/colleges offer AS levels.

If your child wants to benefit from different learning styles, some schools offer the option to take a combination of A levels with BTEC.

- [UCAS](#)
- [The Uni Guide](#)

Extended Project Qualification

Alongside A levels (or equivalent), many schools offer EPQ (Extended Project Qualification) which is a dissertation or project created on the basis of independent research and worth between 8 and 28 UCAS points.

Students can choose the subject matter, so this can be focused around their interests.

A different approach to learning

There's minimum supervision for EPQs, just a little light guidance. This means that research, structure and composition of the project is down to your child, as is meeting deadlines. This approach is much closer to what will be expected at university (or even in the workplace), so it's a good introduction to them finding their own way of learning. However, this style of working doesn't suit everyone, so check whether your child can cope with the added pressures an EPQ may bring.

Some universities may lower their typical offer if a particular grade is achieved in the EPQ



University offers

An EPQ is the equivalent to half an A-level. Unlike a fourth A level, the EPQ points are added to the UCAS total combined with the total achieved from the first three A level passes, so it can be a useful way for your child to increase their UCAS points.

For universities that use subject grades rather than UCAS points for entry, some may even make two offers: one without the EPQ and one including the EPQ. For example, the standard offer might be BBB but the second offer (with the EPQ) could be BBC plus a pass grade in the EPQ. This might allow your child the flexibility they need to meet the entry requirements of competitive universities.

Students can choose the subject matter for their EPQ, so this can be focused around their interests or future degree / career plans.

What skills will your child develop

In developing their own way of working, they're likely to become better at:

- Managing their time;
- Conducting research;
- Summarising lots of information clearly;
- Motivating themselves;
- Presenting to an audience;
- Reflecting;
- Working independently;
- Responding to feedback;
- Accepting when things don't go to plan.

These can be excellent qualities to mention in personal statements (if they are applying to university) or for discussion in interviews for jobs.

- [CIFE](#)
- [University compare](#)

Apprenticeships at a glance

Qualification type

Advanced Level 3
(equivalent to 2 A levels)

Type of learning

Work based including off-site learning

Qualifications needed to sign up

Advanced Level 3 - depends on employer, some require at least 3 GCSEs. Students need to show they can complete the programme

Subject choices

Range of vocational subjects, driven by the job offered

Length of commitment

1-2 years

Tuition costs

Free (unless parents choose to pay privately)

Can lead to

Further study, training, professional development programmes or work

Apprenticeships

Apprenticeships are real jobs which include learning elements which might take place at university, college or an education provider. Apprenticeships were developed to help address the skills shortage in UK businesses. They provide a way of combining learning with on the job training to build professional skills transferable from one organisation to another.

Sixteen year olds can start an apprenticeship at Level 2 (few qualifications required) or Level 3 (5 GCSEs required). There is no level one as enrolling on an apprenticeship requires demonstrating a certain ability. Students with no qualifications can take on a traineeship or internship to help them achieve the necessary skills to start an apprenticeship - see page 31.

Most apprenticeships work towards one or more qualifications. These qualifications correspond to the level of apprenticeship. Advanced apprenticeships (level 3) provide qualifications equivalent to 2 A levels. Level 3 qualifications may include National Certificates, National Diplomas or

NVQs which will open up choices once your child is 18.

Flexibility

Apprenticeships are often flexible in that it may be possible to extend the apprenticeship period and obtain a higher qualification. For example, some apprenticeships will allow students to continue on to a higher apprenticeship (level 4 / 5) once the advanced apprenticeship is complete. Always check with their employer whether such progression is possible.

Unlike BTECs, which are studied at school or college, apprenticeships also include an element of study at work, so there is a real-life component to the course.

- [Apprenticeships - GOV](#)
- [The Parents' Guide to](#)

Apprenticeship levels:



Typical length

12-18 months

Entry requirements:

None or few

Qualifications obtained:

GCSE, BTEC or equivalent

Who's it for?

Mostly for 16-year-olds with limited or no academic qualifications.



Typical length

3-5 years

Entry requirements:

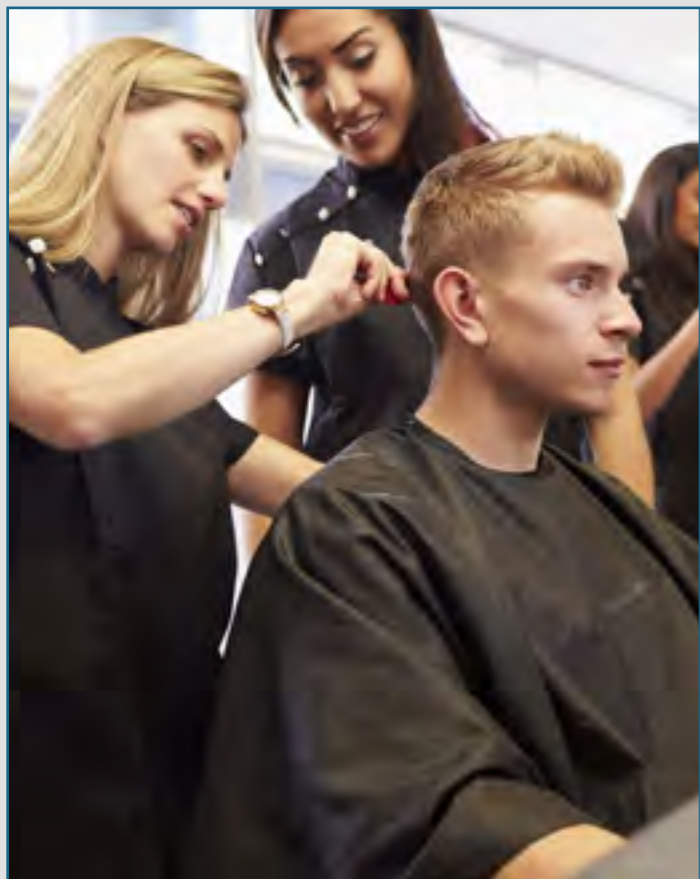
A levels or equivalent

Qualifications obtained:

Higher national diploma / foundation degree

Who's it for?

Mostly for those who want to qualify for professional career paths without attending university or college.



Typical length

12-24 months

Entry requirements:

Usually 5 GCSEs

Qualifications obtained:

A levels or equivalent

Who's it for?

Mostly for 16-year-olds with reasonable academic achievements but who don't want to study in sixth form.



Typical length

3-7 years

Entry requirements:

At least 2 A levels or equivalent

Qualifications obtained:

A BA or BSc degree or higher

Who's it for?

Mostly for those with excellent sixth form results that want to study for a degree or similar whilst working.

All their options - part 1 of 2

	A levels	International Baccalaureate	BTEC Nationals	T-Levels (England only)
Qualification type	General Certificate of Advanced level qualification	International Baccalaureate Diploma	Business and Technology Education Council Diplomas <i>(Level 3 are similar standard to A Levels, with subsidiary diploma equivalent to one A level, BTEC diploma equivalent to 2 A levels and extended diploma equivalent to 3 A levels).</i>	Technical Level Qualification
Type of learning	Mostly theory	Mostly theory, some practical	Combination of practical and theory	Classroom learning (80%) with industry placement (20%)
Qualifications needed to sign up	At least x5 GCSE grade 4 - 9. At least grade 5/6 in the subject/s chosen for A level	Set by the school, up to 5 GCSEs	Up to 5 GCSEs	Up to 5 GCSEs
Subject choices	Three subjects	Up to six subjects (three standard level and three at higher level plus some compulsory modules including an extended essay)	Three vocational subjects	One industry field, such as construction or Education
Commitment	2 years full time			
Tuition costs	Free (unless parents choose to pay privately)			
UCAS points awarded for passing	56 points - A* 48 points - A 40 points - B 32 points - C 24 points - D 16 points - E	56 points - Higher Level 7 48 points - Higher Level 6 32 points - Higher Level 5 24 points - Higher Level 4 12 points - Higher Level 3	For subsidiary diploma: 56 points - D* (distinction) 48 points - D 32 points - M (merit) 16 points - P (pass) <i>Points are doubled for diploma and tripled for extended diploma</i>	168 points - Distinction* 144 points - Distinction 120 points - Merit 96 points - Pass (C or above) 72 points - Pass (D or E)
Can lead to	University, further study, training or work	University, further study, training or work	University, further study, training, professional development programmes or work	University, further study, training, professional development programmes or work

Other considerations



Academic or vocational?

If your child's keen to focus on vocational qualifications they are likely to find more choice at colleges than at schools. If they do want to stay at school, BTEC courses might be more appealing than A Levels.

Single sex or co-ed?

Sixth form can be a great opportunity to move from single sexed schools to mixed schools (or vice versa). This can be a good time to go co-ed and start acclimatising to the atmosphere with both sexes, which is what they will experience at work and in post-18 education. However, there can be a lot of social pressure so is this the right time for your child to adapt?

State to private?

Private education is expensive, but sixth form does offer the opportunity of benefiting from smaller classes, greater pastoral care and more guidance whilst knowing the financial commitment is just two years.

Private to state?

If your child's at private school and finances are beginning to pinch, this can be a good time to move. Your child won't get the same level of personal attention but a stronger atmosphere encouraging self-management and accountability can put them on a good path for the future.

There are plenty of alternative options if your child has not done well in their GCSEs

Results Day 2025

When GCSE results come out in August 2025, your child may not have done quite as well in the subjects they have selected to study at sixth form as they had hoped.

Please be reassuring and supportive at this time, and try not to get angry, disappointed and frustrated – especially if it is a case of “I told you so”! There are usually alternatives and a positive approach offers a faster route to finding happy solutions.

Low grades do not mean they cannot study their chosen subject at sixth form. There may be an option to retake the GCSE, or commence the sixth form subject without a retake. However, in some cases, GCSE results are a strong indicator of future performance and it may not be wise to pursue a subject for which they do not have a natural aptitude; choosing an alternative subject might be a better option. Speak to their school teachers and get advice about next steps.

Possible options if they don't do well in their GCSEs

1. Speak with their chosen place of study. Will they accept them even though they have not met minimum standards? It's worth asking - they may say yes so long as your child commits to some additional work
2. Retake failed subjects
3. Do similar sixth form studies somewhere different without having to retake exams
4. Do an internship, traineeship or volunteer placement to obtain an be able to prove that they have the skills needed to continue further studies
5. Start an apprenticeship

GCSE Results Day 2025

GCSE Results Day 2025 has yet to be confirmed, but it is likely to take place week commencing 21st August. We'll include live updates on The Parents' Guide to website - [click here to know the latest.](#)

- [The Parents' Guide to GCSE Results Day](#)

SEND (special educational needs and disability)

If your child has SEND and is moving to a new educational establishment (whether a different school, college or other education provider), make sure you advise them in advance so that they can be involved in ensuring they are able to meet your child's needs or get support from outside if necessary.

Regular Assessment

The school or college should regularly assess your child's needs and keep written records of reviews. They will communicate directly with your child, so you'll need to come to an agreement about how you'll be kept up to date so that you can be involved and provide the right level of support.

Finding local support services

All local authorities are required, by law, to provide information and advice for children and young people with SEN. This is available online, by phone or face to face. If you check your local government's website, you will find the Local Offer section which provides information on education, health and social care services in your area.

You can also approach your child's existing school, your doctor or charities and other organisations that offer support and services.

EHCs

If your child has an education and healthcare plan ("EHC") this will continue to apply through their post-16 studies (but not if they progress to higher education after they are 18). If they have an EHC and they have additional needs outside of those met by the school or college in order to deliver on the provision set by the plan, you can request a Personal Budget to help (such as therapy or transport costs). Applications are considered by the local authority on a case by case basis.

If your child does not have an EHC but you think they need one, you (or they) can request an assessment.

- [GOV UK](#)
- [SEND Parent Hub](#)

Benefits

If your child has SEND they might get some help during exams, such as more time, permission to use technology (such as being able to type a paper rather than handwrite it), a reader, a scribe, rest breaks and even a separate room. However, they will have to demonstrate a history of need.

All Further Education providers should have a named individual in charge of SEND provision.



Financial support

Education and training is provided free of charge (unless at a private school). If you claim Child Benefit, Child Tax Credit or Universal Credit for your child, these automatically stop when your child reaches 16 but can be extended until 19 if your child is in full time education. Make sure you notify the relevant authority. Some other financial support is available depending on specific needs.

Free meals

Students of families on low incomes can apply for free meals, so long

as they are studying at an institute funded via the Education and Skills Funding Agency.

Residential loans

Students needing specialist provision which means they have to live away from home to study can apply for residential loans via the [Residential Bursary Fund](#).

Vulnerable Groups

Students classed as vulnerable groups (such as in care, receiving income support or disability allowance) can claim a bursary up to £1,200 each year.

Discretionary bursary

It may be possible to get a discretionary bursary if students need financial help but do not qualify for a bursary for students in vulnerable groups. The education or training provider decides how much is awarded and what it's used for.

Grants

It may be possible to get a grant from the [Family Action Trust](#), who provide small grants for additional costs associated with a course of study such as clothing and/or equipment required for the course, travel, examination costs, computers/laptops.

Care to Learn

Students under 20 years old with their own children can apply for "care to learn" grants to provide childcare while they are studying up to a maximum of £160 per week (£175 in London) via the [Student Bursary support service](#).

- [Bursary Fund](#)
- [National Carers Service](#)

Where to find out more:

There's heaps of information about post 16 options on the [Government's website](#). You can find details of what's available in your local area by checking your Local Authority's website – [find your local council here](#).

Your child's current school should also be able to help and you can approach any further education institute directly.

There's free advice from the [National Careers Service](#).





Final words

Sixteen marks a milestone for you and your child. It's a great opportunity to take stock and consider how well things have worked in the past and what adjustments are needed so they will work well in the future.

If your child has had a difficult time up to this point, it's a chance to consider why this is, and change either the style of study or place of study (and perhaps even both), so they can make a fresh start. If your child loves their school and they can take the right qualifications, there's no need for them to leave; if they've enjoyed it up to this point but now feel they've outgrown it, it's the perfect time to move on. If they feel they want to get into the workplace, there are plenty of different options whether they want

to include an element of academic learning or focus more strongly on practical experience.

Sixteen is possibly the first time your child is making decisions for themselves that will have a significant impact on their future. It's important for them to realise that they will need to make choices that are right for them and not follow what their friends are doing; it's the first step toward their independent future.

Whilst they should be making decisions for themselves, it's still important that they get help, guidance and reliable advice from you.

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