



# QUALIFICATIONS EXPLAINED

WHAT DO THEY ALL MEAN?

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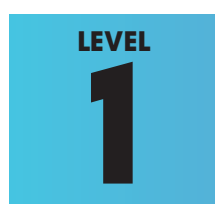
# QUALIFICATIONS EXPLAINED

**This booklet contains details about the better-known qualifications in England.**

There are nine levels of qualifications starting at entry level then level one through to level eight. The difficulty of the qualification increases with the level of qualification with level eight being the most complex.

Qualifications are split into academic, vocational, and work-based learning. Academic qualifications include GCSEs, A levels and degrees. Vocational qualifications include T levels and Higher National certificates. Work-based qualifications include NVQs and degree apprenticeships.

Entry level qualifications do not have entry requirements and are a good start for somebody wanting to start working their way through qualifications but with no previous qualifications.



**qualifications include**

GCSEs at grades 1-3 and functional skills



**qualifications include**

GCSEs at grades 4-9 and NVQs



**qualifications include**

A levels and T levels



**qualifications include**

Higher National Certificates



**qualifications include**

foundation degrees and Higher National Diplomas



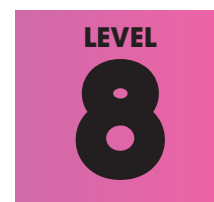
**qualifications include**

undergraduate degrees and professional qualifications



**qualifications include**

master's degrees and postgraduate certificates



**qualifications are**

doctorates

# GCSE'S

**GCSE STANDS FOR GENERAL CERTIFICATE OF SECONDARY EDUCATION. IT'S THE PART OF THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM TAUGHT TO PUPILS AGED 14 TO 16 IN YEARS 10 AND 11. IT ALSO INCLUDES EXAMS, THE RESULTS OF WHICH HAVE A SIGNIFICANT BEARING ON A CHILD'S FUTURE CAREER. GCSES ARE THE EXAMS CHILDREN HAVE TO TAKE AT THE END OF KEY STAGE 4.**

## **What is Key Stage 4 (KS4)?**

Education is divided into 4 key stages. The last of these, Key Stage 4 (KS4), is taught to children in Years 10 and 11 at secondary school, when they are 14 to 16 years old. The courses studied in KS4 are GCSE and the all-important GCSE exams are held at the end of Year 11.

## **Which subjects are compulsory in GCSEs?**

There is some freedom regarding which subjects are studied at GCSE level. Three core subjects, English, Maths and Science are compulsory along with citizenship and PE (although there are no exams in the latter two). All other subjects taken at GCSE are optional.

## **What are 'entitlement areas'?**

As well as the five compulsory subjects, schools must also provide access to a minimum of one course in each of four 'entitlement areas'. They must also make it possible for pupils to take one course in all four of these if they wish to do so. The four entitlement areas are:

- The arts (art and design, music, dance, drama and media arts)
- Design and technology (electronics, food technology, graphics, resistant materials, systems and control, textiles and product design)
- The humanities (geography and history)
- Modern foreign language (French, German, Spanish etc.)

Optional subjects for KS4 vary between schools. Some subjects may be restricted and others (in particular languages like German, for example) may not be offered at all.

## **How many GCSEs must children take?**

Each school determines the number of GCSEs its pupils can take, which could be as many as 12 or as few as 7. Aside from the obligatory Maths, Science and English, pupils select their remaining

GCSE options in Year 9. What they choose will have bearings on their future so they need to pick subjects required for any chosen career as well as ones that interest them and ones they are good at.

## How are GCSEs graded?

In the past GCSE students were given marks between A\* (the highest) and G (the lowest). Scores below a G were marked as U for 'ungraded'. However, things have changed. Grades now range from 9 (highest) to 1 (lowest). Here's how the new grades compare to the old:

- > **GRADE 9**  
The top mark is even higher than the old A\*

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- > **GRADE 8**  
Below an A\* but above an A

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- > **GRADE 7**  
Slightly below an A but only just

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- > **GRADE 6**  
Slightly better than a B

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- > **GRADE 5**  
Below a B but above a C.  
Also called a 'strong pass'

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- > **GRADE 4**  
Equivalent of a C.  
Also called a 'standard pass'

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- > **GRADE 3**  
Below a D but above an E

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- > **GRADE 2**  
Between an E and an F

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- > **GRADE 1**  
Between an F and a G

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- > **UNGRADED**  
The lowest mark possible.  
As in the old system, a U denotes a fail

## Why was the GCSE grading system changed?

The new GCSE grading system was introduced to differentiate between the very highest performing children. Along with the change in marking, some of the questions have changed too and are now a little more challenging. The aim is to find the very brightest pupils. In 2017 only 3% of students managed to score the much sought-after Grade 9.

## How important are GCSEs?

GCSEs are the most important exams students take before college or university. The results have a huge effect on pupils' futures. Many college courses require a minimum of 5 GCSEs at grade 4 or above (C or more in the old grading system) and some demand five grade 6s (A or A\*).

Some college courses only accept students with grade 6 or more (A or A\*) in that subject for GCSE and universities often require a minimum of grade 4 (C or above) in English, Maths and at least one science before they will accept you for any course.

How well students do in their GCSEs is the only real indication colleges have of potential students' abilities.

## How long is a GCSE course?

GCSE exams come after two-year courses of study during which pupils will be taught everything they need to know for their exams. And it's not all necessarily about exams - in many subjects, students' coursework is assessed as part of their GCSE results.

## Which GCSE subjects include coursework as part of the final grade?

In practical subjects, like art, design and technology, or music, 60% of a student's GCSE grade will be marked on their coursework. The English Literature result is also partly assessed with 40% of the final mark being based on work done in class or at home.

GCSEs are important exams and vital for those wishing to go into further education.

# NVQ'S

**NVQS ARE AWARDED AT SIX DIFFERENT LEVELS, EQUIVALENT TO OTHER ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS. A LEVEL 6 NVQ IS EQUIVALENT TO A BACHELOR'S DEGREE, WHILE LEVELS 4 AND 5 EQUATE TO THE FIRST AND SECOND YEARS OF A BACHELOR'S DEGREE RESPECTIVELY. NVQS ARE FOCUSED ON PRACTICAL SKILLS IN THE CONTEXT OF YOUR FULL OR PART-TIME WORK. YOU MUST BE EMPLOYED PRIOR TO ENROLLING ONTO AN NVQ COURSE.**

Instead of taking exams, you're assessed by demonstrating your ability to do your job over a period of time - by submitting a portfolio and undergoing observations by an assessor. Candidates are observed on each unit when they're ready, meaning there's no time limit on completing NVQ modules.

National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) are designed to demonstrate a learner's occupational competence. They are usually delivered in the workplace, although some sectors and levels may be delivered in settings that replicate the working environment if this is explicitly stated by the relevant Sector Skills Council or Standards Setting Body.

NVQs are based on the National Occupational Standards, which define the skills, knowledge and understanding needed to do a particular job.

National Occupational Standards are set by Sector Skills Councils or Standards Setting Bodies in consultation with the sector.

National Occupational Standards are statements of performance which describe what competent people in an area of work should be able to do. This may include:

- the knowledge and understanding that underpin competent performance
- current best practice
- the standards required for competence

## Different NVQ levels

Each NVQ is a competency grading which shows how able you are at a particular job, therefore the higher your level the higher your proven ability to complete a task. You can either start at level 1 or a higher level depending on your current ability, up to level 5.

- > **NVQ LEVEL 1:** this is the entry level NVQ and shows that you are able to apply a range of basic skills and knowledge in a routine and predictable way within the workplace.
- > **NVQ LEVEL 2:** achieving the second level allows you to use your range of skills and knowledge in a variety of contexts and varied tasks, as well as complex issues or non-routine aspects of the job. You are required to demonstrate your teamwork skills and must showcase some individual work and individual responsibility.
- > **NVQ LEVEL 3:** to reach level 3, you must use your range of skills and knowledge in complex or non-routine aspects more often than not. You must be trusted with more responsibility, and you are often left to guide others, which is essential in NVQ level 3 courses.
- > **NVQ LEVEL 4:** this higher level showcases your good knowledge of workplace skills and knowledge in all situations. You will hold a substantial degree of responsibility, and you will direct others, it will often be left up to you to allocate resources.
- > **NVQ LEVEL 5:** As the hardest level to achieve you will hold a high degree of responsibility for other workers, taking responsibility for their work as well as allocating resources. You will be able to use a variety of skills in any situation that may occur, including those that are unplanned and unpredictable. You are responsible for analysis, diagnosis, design, planning, executing and evaluating.

## Why study for an NVQ?

NVQs give many people the opportunity to work and achieve a qualification at the same time. They are usually studied part-time and can be taken as a stand-alone qualification, or as part of an Apprenticeship.

NVQs and competence-based qualifications offer proof that you can do a job to the required standard. They are offered at different levels, ranging from 1 to 7 depending on the sector. This means you can study at the level that's right for your job role and level of experience, and progress accordingly.

NVQs are outcome-based with no fixed learning programme, giving centres the flexibility to deliver the course to meet each individual candidate's needs.

NVQs are sector-specific qualifications. They are available for a huge variety of careers across a wide range of industry sectors, ranging from hairdressing and engineering to policing and design.

## How are NVQs graded?

The overall grade for each qualification is a 'pass'. To achieve this, you must pass all the required units studied on the course.

## How are NVQs assessed?

The assessment is based on the practical activity undertaken in the workplace and a portfolio of evidence to show that the occupational standards are met. A qualified assessor observes work being carried out in the workplace to test knowledge and understanding.

NVQs are assessed internally, with all internal assessment quality assured by qualified external verifiers.

## What can I do once I've taken an NVQ?

NVQs are designed to enhance your promotion prospects by allowing you to learn and demonstrate new skills.

Once you've completed your course, you may decide you want to continue with further training, like an NVQ at the next level or another related professional qualification.

If you've studied an NVQ at level 3, you could also achieve a full Apprenticeship by completing the remaining qualifications in the framework including the BTEC Specialist qualification for the sector.

## NVQ Subject List

There are literally hundreds of NVQ subjects to choose from. From construction NVQs to hairdressing NVQs, customer service NVQs to laboratory science NVQs, and even racehorse care, NVQ in care, Arabic, aeronautical engineering, and childcare NVQs. In fact, there are too many to include them all in a complete subject list of NVQs here, but here are the overarching categories:

- > Building and construction, and warehousing and distribution
- > Engineering, manufacturing, and transportation operations and maintenance

- > Science, horticulture, animal care and veterinary science
- > Sport, leisure and recreation, and travel and tourism
- > Hospitality and catering and service enterprises
- > Language, literature and culture
- > Health and social care, public services and child development
- > Marketing, sales, administration and business management
- > Crafts, creative arts and design, and media and communication

## How long does an NVQ take?

- > Each level of the NVQ can take any amount of time to complete, but it usually takes around a year to complete each NVQ Level 1 and NVQ Level 2. On reaching NVQ Level 3 it may take a further year or even two further years due to the higher level.
- > Once you've earned your NVQ, it's a life-long qualification.





# APPRENTICESHIPS

**APPRENTICESHIPS COMBINE ON THE JOB TRAINING WITH CLASSROOM LEARNING AND START AT INTERMEDIATE LEVEL RIGHT UP TO DEGREE LEVEL. THEY CAN TAKE FROM 1 TO 6 YEARS TO COMPLETE DEPENDING ON THE LEVEL AND YOU WILL EARN AT LEAST THE NATIONAL MINIMUM WAGE WHILST YOU LEARN**

## **How apprenticeships work**

On an apprenticeship, you're employed to do a real job while studying for a formal qualification - usually for one day a week either at a college or training centre. By the end of your apprenticeship, you'll hopefully have gained the skills and knowledge needed to either succeed in your chosen career or progress onto the next apprenticeship level.

What you'll learn depends on the role that you're training for. However, apprentices in every role follow an approved study programme, which means you'll gain a nationally-recognised qualification at the end of your apprenticeship.

These qualifications can include:

- > **FUNCTIONAL SKILLS** - GCSE-level qualifications in English, Maths and IT.
- > **NATIONAL VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS (NVQS)** - from Level 2 (comparable to five GCSEs) up to Level 5 (similar to a postgraduate degree).
- > **TECHNICAL CERTIFICATES** - such as BTEC, City and Guild Progression Award etc.
- > **ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS** - including a Higher National Certificate (HNC), Higher National Diploma (HND), foundation degree or the equivalent of a full Bachelors degree.

You will also be developing your transferable or soft skills - these are the skills that employers are looking for and are often called employability skills. These skills include team work, communication, initiative, creativity, integrity, problem solving and ability with IT and numbers.

# APPRENTICESHIPS

## Apprenticeship levels

There are four different levels of apprenticeship:

- > **INTERMEDIATE**  
Equivalent to five good GCSE passes.
- > **ADVANCED**  
Equivalent to two A-level passes.
- > **HIGHER**  
Equivalent to the first stages of higher education, such as a foundation degree.
- > **DEGREE**  
Bachelor's or Master's degree.

Most job sectors offer apprenticeship opportunities in the UK, with a wide range of specific roles on offer within each. These include:

Accounting apprenticeships in areas such as bills and expenses, payroll and taxes, plus banking apprenticeships.

- > Business apprenticeships in business administration, business development, consultancy and leadership.
- > Construction apprenticeships in building, plumbing and quantity surveying.
- > Engineering apprenticeships in civil, mechanical and electrical engineering.
- > Healthcare apprenticeships, in areas such as dentistry and nursing.
- > Human resources (HR) apprenticeships for those looking to progress in support, consultancy and management roles.
- > IT apprenticeships in information security and software development.
- > Law apprenticeships offered at paralegal, legal executive and solicitor level.
- > Marketing apprenticeships in digital marketing, social media and public relations (PR).
- > Media apprenticeships in the television, radio and film industries.
- > Retail apprenticeships for those in buying, merchandising and management roles. There are also sales apprenticeships.
- > Transport apprenticeships in a range of logistics, road, railway, automotive and airline industry roles.

## Length of Apprenticeships

The length of an apprenticeship depends on a number of things, these include the level of the apprenticeship (the higher the level, the longer it takes), the vocational sector, the employer's needs and the apprentice's ability.

However, apprenticeships will usually last between one and six years.

The framework is as follows:

- > intermediate apprenticeships typically last between one year and 18 months
- > advanced apprenticeships are usually studied over two years
- > higher and degree apprenticeships take three-to-six years to complete.

If you're aged under 19 and an apprentice, or 19 or over and still in your first year as an apprentice, you'll be entitled to the apprenticeship wage. Apprentices aged 19 or over and who've completed their first year will be able to claim the National Minimum Wage (NMW).

This is a guideline as some employers will offer a higher salary and you will also be entitled to statutory sick pay, 20 days paid holiday per year and any additional benefits that the employer offers to their employees.

Working hours will depend on the employer but will not be more than 40 hours per week.

## Age Limit

There is no upper age limit on being an apprentice but you do have to be over 16.

# APPRENTICESHIPS

## Entry requirements

As each type of apprenticeship offers a different-levelled qualification on the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), their entry requirements will vary. Generally speaking, they are as follows:

- To apply for an intermediate apprenticeship, you'll just need to be over 16 years old and no longer in full-time education.
- For an advanced apprenticeship, you're likely to be asked for prior work experience and at least three 9-4 grade GCSEs or equivalent - such as an intermediate apprenticeship qualification.
- As higher apprenticeships are the equivalent of a foundation degree, HNC or first year of a Bachelors, you'll usually need at least five 9-4 grade GCSEs, as well as some Level 3 qualifications in relevant subjects, to apply. Your Level 3 qualifications could be AS-levels, a BTEC National or a Level 3 NVQ.
- Degree apprenticeships will have the tightest entry requirements. These may include three A-levels in a specified grade range or a higher apprenticeship qualification, on top of at least five 9-4 GCSE grades. It's also likely you'll be required to have prior work experience.

## Remember

- Apprenticeships are not an easy option. Not only are you studying, but you're also working 80% of a full-time role. If you are working at a higher level apprenticeship you will need to study in the evenings and at weekends. However, not only can you gain a degree, but do so without amassing student debt and earn a salary.
- Look carefully into the study method and make sure you choose a course that's right for you. Some will be weekly classes, others will be block learning and some may have an assessor coming to the workplace on a monthly basis.
- Talk to other apprentices from the companies that you are hoping to work for.



# T-LEVELS

**T LEVELS ARE NEW COURSES WHICH FOLLOW GCSES AND ARE EQUIVALENT TO 3 A LEVELS. THESE 2-YEAR COURSES, WHICH LAUNCHED IN SEPTEMBER 2020, HAVE BEEN DEVELOPED IN COLLABORATION WITH EMPLOYERS AND BUSINESSES SO THAT THE CONTENT MEETS THE NEEDS OF INDUSTRY AND PREPARES STUDENTS FOR WORK, FURTHER TRAINING OR STUDY. T LEVELS ARE A BRAND NEW, 2-YEAR QUALIFICATION THAT YOU CAN DO AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO A LEVELS, OTHER POST-16 COURSES OR AN APPRENTICESHIP. THEY ARE EQUIVALENT TO 3 A LEVELS. THEY BRING CLASSROOM LEARNING AND AN EXTENDED INDUSTRY PLACEMENT TOGETHER ON A COURSE DESIGNED WITH BUSINESSES AND EMPLOYERS.**

T Levels offer students a mixture of classroom learning and 'on-the-job' experience during an industry placement of at least 315 hours (approximately 45 days).

T Levels are ideal if you have finished your GCSEs and want the knowledge and experience to get straight into employment, an apprenticeship or higher education.

## What can I study a T level in?

### September 2020

The first T Level courses started in these subject areas:

- > design, surveying and planning for construction
- > digital production, design and development
- > education and childcare

### September 2021

T Level courses start in these subject areas:

- > building services engineering for construction
- > digital business services
- > digital support and services
- > health
- > healthcare science
- > onsite construction
- > science

### September 2022

T Level courses start in these subject areas:

- > accounting
- > design and development for engineering and manufacturing
- > engineering, manufacturing, processing

- and control
- > finance
- > maintenance, installation and repair for engineering and manufacturing
- > management and administration

## September 2023

T Level courses start in these subject areas:

- > animal care and management
- > agriculture, land management and production
- > catering
- > craft and design
- > hair, beauty and aesthetics
- > human resources
- > legal
- > media, broadcast and production

From September 2021, Heart of Worcestershire College are offering T levels in Education and Childcare and Digital Production, Design and Development ([www.how.ac.uk](http://www.how.ac.uk)) and Warwickshire College Group will be offering T-Levels in digital support services ([www.wcg.ac.uk](http://www.wcg.ac.uk)).

## How T Levels will work with other qualifications

T Levels will become one of the main choices for students after GCSE alongside:

- > apprenticeships for students who wish to learn a specific occupation 'on the job'
- > A levels for students who wish to continue academic education

T Levels are based on the same standards as apprenticeships, designed by employers and approved by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education. It is expected that the total time for a T Level will be around 1,800 hours over the 2 years, including the industry placement. This is a significant increase on most current technical education courses.

This differs from an apprenticeship, which is typically 80% on-the-job and 20% in the

classroom and is more suited to those who know what occupation they want to pursue, want to earn a wage and learn at the same time and are ready to enter the workforce at age 16.

## How T Levels have been developed

Employers and providers have been working together to develop each T Level, with support from DfE and the Institute. Groups of employers have defined the skills and requirements for each T Level course by participating in T Level panels. This ensures that students taking T Levels will develop the technical knowledge and skills required by employers in that industry.

The T Level panels have developed the content for the qualification, based on the same standards as apprenticeships and these plans are then tested and reviewed with students, education providers and employers.

## Structure of a T Level

T Level courses include the following compulsory elements:

- > a technical qualification, which includes:
- > core theory, concepts and skills for an industry area
- > specialist skills and knowledge for an occupation or career
- > an industry placement with an employer
- > a minimum standard in maths and English if students have not already achieved them

## Industry placements

Every T Level includes an industry placement with an employer focused on developing the practical and technical skills required for the occupation. These will last a minimum of 315 hours (approximately 45 days) but can last longer. Employers can offer industry placements as a block, day release or a mix of these, and can discuss sharing part of the placement with another employer if necessary.

## Grading and certification

Students who complete their T Level will receive an overall grade of pass, merit, distinction or distinction\*. They will get a nationally recognised certificate which will show their overall grade and a breakdown of what they have achieved.

The T Level certificate will include:

an overall grade for the T Level, shown as pass, merit, distinction or distinction\*

- a separate grade for the core component, using A\* to E
- a separate grade for each occupational specialism, shown as pass, merit or distinction

It will also include confirmation that the student has:

- met the minimum requirements for maths and English qualifications
- completed the industry placement
- met any additional mandatory requirements

A student's overall T Level grade will be worked out from the grades they achieved on the core component and the occupational specialism(s).

Students who do not pass all elements of their T Level will get a T Level statement of achievement which will show the elements they have completed.

## UCAS tariff points

T Levels will provide several progression options to students. These include skilled employment, an apprenticeship and higher education.

UCAS points will only be allocated to the overall T Level grade. Students must achieve at least an overall pass grade to receive UCAS points.

UCAS tariff points	T Level overall grade	A level grade
168	Distinction* (A* on the core and distinction in the occupational specialism)	AAA*
144	Distinction	AAA
120	Merit	BBB
96	Pass (C or above on the core)	CCC
72	Pass (D or E on the core)	DDD



# AS AND A-LEVELS

**AS AND A LEVELS - SOMETIMES CALLED GENERAL CERTIFICATES OF EDUCATION (GCE) OR ADVANCED LEVELS - ARE NORMALLY STUDIED AFTER LEVEL 2 IN A BTEC OR GCSEs, BUT YOU CAN TAKE THEM AT ANY AGE. THEY MAINLY INVOLVE STUDYING THE THEORY OF A SUBJECT COMBINED WITH SOME INVESTIGATIVE WORK, AND ARE USUALLY STUDIED FULL-TIME OVER TWO YEARS AT SCHOOL OR COLLEGE. AS AND A LEVELS ARE AT LEVEL 3 ON THE NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK. ADVANCED LEVEL QUALIFICATIONS ARE SUBJECT-BASED QUALIFICATIONS THAT CAN LEAD TO UNIVERSITY, FURTHER STUDY, TRAINING, OR WORK. YOU CAN NORMALLY STUDY THREE OR MORE A LEVELS OVER TWO YEARS.**

Typical A-level subjects include: ones you've studied before: history, music, chemistry etc; variations on ones you've studied before: e.g. you could choose between English literature, English language, or English literature and language; or you could take maths and further maths; subjects you've never had the chance to study before: e.g. law, philosophy, psychology etc

AS levels generally take one year to complete and A levels are studied across two years. Generally students progress to AS and A levels in the academic year following their GCSE results, but you can take them at any age.

When the new AS and A levels were introduced in September 2015, AS and A levels were decoupled in England so that AS level results no longer count towards an A level and the AS level becomes a stand-alone qualification.

Most people take 4 AS subjects and then drop one of those subjects when they move into their A2 year. For the subjects you carry on with the following year: while they aren't worthless, these marks won't contribute to your final A-level grades a year later. For the subject you drop: these marks will decide your grade for what will be your AS-level qualification. Whatever UCAS points this translates to may still contribute to the total points you apply to university with. AS-levels are now equal to 40% of an A-level. The grade you achieve in any AS-level will still go on your UCAS application, (along with your predicted A-level grades).

If you're thinking about going to university, most higher education courses require specific A levels or combinations of A levels (or alternative level 3 qualifications).

If you're not sure what career or job you want to do, studying a selection of A levels can be a good way of keeping your options open.

## Choosing A level subjects

The most important criteria for choosing A levels subjects are:

- Looking at what you are likely to enjoy and be good at. If you enjoy a subject or have an ability in it already, you are more likely to do well.
- Are there any particular subjects and/or grades you may need? If you have a particular career, job, or further study in mind, you may need to choose specific A levels in order to meet entry requirements.
- How open you want to keep your future study and career choices?

## How many A levels can I study?

The number of A-level exams taken by students can vary. A typical route is to study four subjects at AS level and then drop down to three at A2 level, although some students continue with their fourth subject. Three is usually the minimum number of A Levels required for university entrance, with some universities specifying the need for a fourth AS subject. There is no limit set on the number of A Levels one can study, and a number of students take five or more A Levels, if they're planning to apply to a competitive university (eg Oxford, Cambridge) or course (eg medicine, law), for example. Most universities' A-level entry requirements boil down to three A-level grades.

## How are A levels graded?

- The pass grades for A Levels are, from highest to lowest, A\*, A, B, C, D and E. Those who do not reach the minimum standard required for a grade E receive the non-grade U (unclassified). There is no A\* grade at AS level.
- The process to decide these grades for modular A Levels involves the uniform mark scheme (UMS). Under this scheme, four-module A levels have a maximum mark of 400 UMS (or 200 UMS each for AS and A2), and six-module A levels have a maximum mark of 600 (or 300 UMS each for AS and A2). The maximum UMS within AS and A2 may be split unequally between each modules.

For example, a Physics AS may have two exam modules worth 90 UMS and 150 UMS, and a coursework module worth 60 UMS. The 'raw marks' i.e. actual score received on a test may differ from UMS awarded. On each assignment, the correspondence of raw marks to UMS is decided by setting grade boundaries, a process which involves consultation by subject experts and consideration of statistics, aiming to keep standards for each grade the same year on year. Achieving less than 40% results in a U (unclassified). For passing grades, 40% corresponds to an E grade, 50% a D, 60% a C, 70% a B, and 80% an A. The A\* grade was introduced in 2010 and is awarded to candidates who average 80% UMS across all modules, with a score over 90% UMS in all A2 modules.<sup>(16)</sup> In Mathematics, which comprises six 100 UMS modules, only the C3 and C4 modules count towards this requirement. In Further Mathematics and Additional Further Mathematics, where more than three A2 modules can be taken, the three best-scoring A2 modules count.

- A Level students often apply to universities before they have taken their final exams, with applications administered centrally through UCAS. British universities (including Scottish universities, which receive many applicants taking A Levels) consider GCSEs, AS-level results, predicted A Level results, and extracurricular accomplishments when deciding whether applicants should be made an offer through UCAS. These offers may be 'unconditional', guaranteeing a place regardless of performance in A2 examinations. Far more often, the offers are conditional on A level grades, and become void should the student fail to achieve the marks expected by the university (for example, conditional offer of three A Levels at grades B-B-C).<sup>(24)</sup> Universities may specify which subjects they wish these grades to be in (for example, conditional offer of grades A-A-B with a grade A in Mathematics).<sup>(24)</sup> The offer may include additional requirements, such as attaining a particular grade in the Sixth Term Examination Paper. The university is obliged to accept the candidate if the conditions are met, but is



# AS AND A-LEVELS

not obliged to reject a candidate who misses the requirements. Leniency may in particular be shown if the candidate narrowly misses grades.

- A Level grades are also sometimes converted into numerical scores, typically UCAS tariff scores. Under the new UCAS system starting in 2017, an A\* grade at A Level is worth 56 points, while an A is worth 48, a B is worth 40, a C is worth 32, a D is 24, and a E is worth 16; (25) so a university may instead demand that an applicant achieve 112 points, instead of the equivalent offer of B-B-C. This allows greater flexibility to students, as 112 points could also, for example, be achieved through the combination A-B-D, which would not have met the requirements of a B-B-C offer because of the D grade.
- Depending on the specific offer made, a combination of more than 3 subjects (typically 4 or 5) with lower grades, or points from non-academic input such as higher level music grades or a Key Skills course, may also be accepted by the university. The text of the offer determines whether this flexibility is available – “112 UCAS Points” likely would, while “112 UCAS Points from three A Level subjects” would not.

## What can you do after A levels?

- Here is a great place to start looking at all the options open to you.
- Continue on to university – A levels are the most common qualifications studied to get into higher education.
- Keep your options open if you’re unsure about what you want to do in the future.
- Look for employment – they’re valued by employers because they show a good level of education.
- Go on to vocational or work-based qualifications, such as a higher apprenticeship.



# DEGREES

**A DEGREE IS AN ACADEMIC COURSE AND QUALIFICATION STUDIED FOR AND ATTAINED AT UNIVERSITY - A BACHELOR'S DEGREE OR MASTER'S DEGREE. FOR SCHOOL LEAVERS, THE MOST RELEVANT DEGREE TO BE AWARE OF IS THE BACHELOR'S DEGREE, WHICH CAN BE TAKEN IN HUNDREDS OF SUBJECTS, RANGING FROM TRADITIONAL ACADEMIC ONES SUCH AS HISTORY, ENGLISH LITERATURE AND GEOGRAPHY, TO THE SCIENCES, TO NEWER SUBJECTS LIKE DIGITAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA.**

## **What is an undergraduate qualification?**

In the UK, an undergraduate degree is an academic step up from A-levels (or their equivalent), typically completed at a university or other higher education institution. There are generally three kinds of undergraduate course:

- those leading to a degree
- intermediate qualifications in the form of certificates or diplomas
- those combining workplace learning and academic study.

As there are a variety of options available to prospective undergraduates, it's important to do your research and see which route suits you best. For further help and guidance, see how to choose the right degree.

## **What's the difference between undergraduate and postgraduate study?**

They both fall under the umbrella term of 'higher education', relating to different levels of qualification. An undergraduate is a candidate enrolled in higher education who hasn't yet received their first degree. A postgraduate is any student engaged in higher education beyond their first degree.

While the majority of undergraduate degree courses include lectures and group projects in their structure, postgraduate courses tend to involve more research-based, independent study, culminating in a final dissertation.

Depending on the subject, undergraduate degrees combine contact time (lectures and seminars, or laboratory time for sciences) with course work and exams. This can range from just a few hours of contact time a week for, say, an English Literature undergraduate, to 45 hours a week for a chemistry student, who might work full-time hours in the university laboratory.

The degree classifications are:

- First-class honours (often called a 1st)
- Second-class honours, upper division (often called a 2:1)
- Second-class honours, lower division (often called a 2:2)
- Third-class honours (often called a 3rd)
- Ordinary degree (often called a pass)

Most degrees require applicants to hold A-levels or level three vocational qualifications.

Unlike education up until the age of 18, not all university degrees are free; in fact, most school leavers wanting to do degrees will have to pay for them. In England students do have to pay for their degrees, at varying prices. Most school leavers take out a student loan to cover these, which they pay off over a number of years, at a rate linked to their income.

Gaining a degree is a great way to gain knowledge in your chosen field. Not only will further education help with your own personal development, it'll also enhance your career opportunities.

## Degree levels

### HND/FOUNDATION DEGREE

#### What is a foundation degree?

Higher national diplomas (HNDs) and foundation degrees are level 5 work-based courses, which are equal to two years at university. They can lead straight into a career, or be 'topped up' by further study to become a full Bachelor's degree.

A foundation degree offers a combination of workplace learning and academic study. It carries the same weight as two-thirds of a Bachelors degree - equivalent to an HND or DipHE qualification, at Level 5 of the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF). Completing a foundation degree full time will usually take two years, with part-time courses lasting around four years.

Candidates looking to formalise their workplace knowledge with a qualification, or those looking to enter a specific profession may wish to consider a foundation degree. There are no set entry requirements, as company training and

relevant work experience may be more useful than formal qualifications.

An HND is equivalent to the second year of a Bachelors degree. It takes two years of full-time study to complete, or three to four years part time, and is designed to equip you with skills relevant to your chosen career. Those looking to enter practical industries such as health and social care, engineering or agriculture may benefit more from an HND than a Bachelors degree.

These courses are typically provided by higher education institutions and to gain entry you'll need a minimum of one or two A-levels. They are mostly classroom taught, but assessment is by projects, presentations and practical tasks rather than traditional exams. Depending on your course subject, you also might be expected to complete work placements.

An HND can lead directly to a career, or can be extended via a 'top-up' course into a full Bachelors degree. Applications for full-time HNDs and top-ups are made through UCAS.

#### How long will it last?

Full-time HNDs/foundation degrees will take around two years to complete, with part-time courses lasting longer.

#### What are the entry requirements?

You'll usually need a minimum of 100 UCAS points to get started on these types of courses - although specific entry requirements may vary. This can be gained through a range of qualifications that are usually studied at school level. These include: one GCE (A level), one advanced VCE, a BTEC, or a diploma.

#### What qualifications will I get?

You'll get an HND or a foundation degree at the end of your course - which can be used to gain access to further study, or go straight into a relevant career.

## BACHELOR'S DEGREE

### What is a Bachelor's degree?

A Bachelor's degree is the most common type of undergraduate degree – and can be studied straight after finishing higher education. It's classed as a level 6 qualification.

### How long will it last?

A Bachelor's degree will usually last three to four years if studied full-time.

### What are the entry requirements?

Entry requirements may vary from course to course – but you'll usually be required to gain a certain number of UCAS points to get started. These can be made up of a variety of level 3 qualifications, including A levels, BTECs, and Diplomas.

### What qualifications will I get?

The specific title of this qualification will depend on the subject studied. Typical types could include Bachelor of Arts (BA), Science (BSc), Law (LLB), and Engineering (BEng). Graduation from this course will allow you carry out postgraduate study, or go straight into your chosen career.

## MASTER'S DEGREE

### What is a Master's degree?

A Master's degree is the most common type of postgraduate qualification, and involves a more in-depth level of study than a Bachelor's degree. They're designed to focus on a specific area of a wider subject – and they can either be taught or research based courses. It's classed as a level 7 qualification.

### How long will it last?

If studied full-time, Master's degrees will last around one to two years. If studied part-time, they'll normally take between two and four years.

### What are the entry requirements?

You'll usually need a minimum of a 2:1 at undergraduate level to be accepted onto a Master's course, although those with a 2:2 may be accepted with relevant professional experience.

### What qualifications will I get?

The qualification you receive after studying for a Master's will depend on your chosen subject and area of study. Master of Arts (MA) and Master of Science (MSc) are the most popular options – but a Master's degree can be achieved in anything from music to architecture.





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