



SSA'S GUIDE TO: COURSE TYPES AND OPTIONS



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Educational Levels and Language in the UK

The UK defines education by levels, but these are also referred to by other names in schools, which can be confusing. Here are some descriptions to help clarify!

Higher Education	Level 8	Doctorate, NVQ, Postgraduate Diploma/Certificate
	Level 7	Masters Degree, Degree Apprenticeship, NVQ, Postgraduate Diploma/Certificate
	Level 6	Bachelors Degree, Degree Apprenticeship, NVQ, Graduate Certificate
	Level 5	HND, Diploma of HE, Foundation Degree, NVQ, Higher Apprenticeship
	Level 4	HNC, Certificate of HE, NVQ, Higher Apprenticeships, Foundation Certificate
Further Education	Level 3	A-Levels, Advanced Apprenticeships, BTEC Level 3, Vocational Diploma/Certificate, NVQ, Access HE Diploma, Music Grades 6
	Level 2	GCSEs (Grades 9,8,7,6,5,4), Intermediate Apprenticeships, BTEC , NVQ, Music Grades 4 and 5, Technical Qualification, etc
Foundation Education	Level 1	Vocational Diploma, BTEC , Traineeship, NVQ, ESOL, Functional Skill, GCSEs (Grades 3,2,1), Music Grades 1,2 and 3, etc
	Entry Level 3	Skills For Life, Functional Skills, Essential Skills, ESOL, etc
	Entry Level 2	
	Entry Level 1	

Further Education: Any education for those under 18 is compulsory and usually involves studying at Level 2 or Level 3. After age 18, education becomes voluntary and typically includes any further study or training at Level 3 or above. Further education is normally undertaken at a college or sixth form.

Higher Education: Higher education includes any voluntary study at Level 4 or above. This is not just about going to university and spending three or four years getting a degree; many colleges and other institutions offer higher education options, which can include HNCs, NVQs, Diplomas, Apprenticeships, or Technical Certificates.

Defining Types of Courses

There are a wide range of different courses and qualifications available. They are taught, assessed, and delivered in many ways. The key below will help you compare and understand them at a glance.

Where You Learn



University



**College, Sixth-
Form, Training
Centre**



At Work

How You Learn



Classroom



Vocational



Practical

‘Vocational learning means that they learn by doing work or work like tasks.’

Defining Types of Courses

How You Are Tested



Written Exam



Practical Exam



**Evidence
Based**

What You Get



**Degree
Certificate**



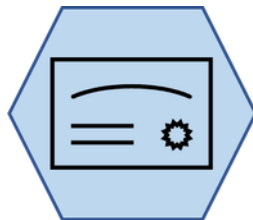
**Technical
Award**



**Academic
Certificate**



**Functional
Skills**



**Competency
Award**



Career Skills

GCSEs



GCSEs are some of the first stand-alone qualifications that students will undertake and are often chosen by the students themselves.

They form the foundation for future study or training and are considered the minimum educational standard expected.

All students need to achieve at least a grade 4 (or equivalent) in Maths and English. If you do not achieve this, you will need to resit these subjects at college or as part of an apprenticeship.

Qualification	Level/Duration	Equates To
GCSE (Grades 3,2,1)	Level 1 (2yrs)	NVQ Lv1, Functional Skills
GCSE (Grades 4+)	Level 2 (2yrs)	BTEC Lv2, NVQ Lv2, Intermediate Apprenticeship

A-Levels



A-Levels are subject-based academic qualifications studied after Year 11 at post-16 providers.

An A-Level focuses on a particular subject and can involve a wide range of work, including written assessments, practical experiments, and projects. Study is supported by both self-study and group work.

Normally, a student will undertake at least three, or up to four, A-Levels. When choosing their chosen A-Levels, students will need at least a grade 6 in the same GCSE subject, or potentially a grade 5 in a related subject.

Qualification	Level/Duration	Equates To
A-Level	Level 3 (2+yrs)	BTEC, NVQ Lv3, Advanced Apprenticeship

BTEC Nationals



BTEC stands for Business and Technology Education Council. These are subject-specific, work-related qualifications that can be studied alongside GCSEs and after Year 11.

BTECs cover a wide range of subject areas and offer different outcomes. These outcomes can count as single, double, or triple qualifications.

BTECs are assessed through exams, coursework, and practical assessments.

Qualification	Level/Duration	Equates To
BTEC Level 1	Level 1 (1yr)	NVQ Lv1, GCSE (Grade 1,2,3)
BTEC Level 2	Level 2 (1+yrs)	GCSE (Grade 4+), NVQ Lv2, Intermediate Apprenticeship
BTEC Level 3	Level 3 (2+yrs)	A-Level, NVQ Lv3, Advanced Apprenticeship

Cambridge Nationals/Technicals



Cambridge Nationals and Cambridge Technicals are subject-specific, work-related qualifications that can be studied alongside GCSEs or A-Levels, or as separate qualifications.

They cover a wide range of subject areas and offer different outcomes. These outcomes can count as single, double, or triple qualifications.

Assessment is through exams, coursework, and practical assessments.

Qualification	Level/Duration	Equates To
BTEC Level 1	Level 1 (1yr)	NVQ Lv1, GCSE (Grade 1,2,3)
BTEC Level 2	Level 2 (1+yrs)	GCSE (Grade 4+), NVQ Lv2, Intermediate Apprenticeship
BTEC Level 3	Level 3 (2+yrs)	A-Level, NVQ Lv3, Advanced Apprenticeship

T-Levels



T-Levels are a further education qualification equivalent to three A-Levels. This means it is the only course a student will take, and it is available to 16–19-year-olds.

Each T-Level is made up of 80% classroom learning and 20% work placement, which equates to 45 days of industry experience. T-Levels are assessed on a pass/fail basis - there are no grades.

T-Levels are not available everywhere yet, as they are currently being trialled. However, more providers will offer them soon, with a growing range of subjects.

Qualification	Level/Duration	Equates To
T-Level	Level 3 (2yrs)	A-Level, BTEC, NVQ Lv3, Advanced Apprenticeship

V-Levels

V-Levels are a new vocational qualification that has been created to replace other vocational Level 3 qualification and will compliment the T-Levels and A-Levels available.

A V-Level is equivalent to 1 A-Level and are designed for learners who:

- prefer applied and vocational learning.
- want to combine vocational and academic study.
- aren't yet ready to specialise in a specific occupation.
- want to keep their progression options open.

Currently available in a limited number of subjects such as Digital, Education & Early Years and Finance and Accounting.



Qualification	Level/Duration	Equates To
V-Level	Level 3 (2yrs)	A-Level, BTEC, NVQ Lv3, Advanced Apprenticeship

NVQs

An NVQ (National Vocational Qualification) is a qualification that can be taken over a flexible period of time and is available for approximately 90% of occupations in the UK.

NVQs allow those who are currently employed, or who want to improve their skills in a specific area, to undertake a vocational programme of learning. While working in a job related to the field or particular area, an NVQ qualification can be gained.



Qualification	Level/Duration	Equates To
NVQ Level 1	Level 1 (1yr)	BTEC Lv1, GCSEs (Grades 1,2,3)
NVQ Level 2	Level 2 (1+yrs)	GCSE (Grades 4+), BTEC Lv2, Intermediate Apprenticeship
NVQ Level 3	Level 3 (2+yrs)	A-Level, BTEC Lv3, Advanced Apprenticeship
NVQ Level 4+	Level 4+ (3+yrs)	HNC, Higher Apprenticeship, Degree, etc

Apprenticeships



An apprenticeship is a nationally designed programme for people aged 16 and over who have left full-time education or who are already in employment.

As an apprentice, you will follow work-based training programmes defined by employers, with a starting salary of £7.55 per hour (increases depend on the employer).

Apprenticeships are offered at multiple levels, starting with Intermediate (Level 2).

Qualification	Level/Duration	Equates To
Intermediate	Level 2 (1-2yrs)	GCSE (Grades 4+), BTEC Lv2, NVQ Lv2
Advanced	Level 3 (1.5-3yrs)	BTEC Lv3, A-Level, NVQ Lv3
Higher	Level 4-5 (1.5-4yrs)	HNC, HND, CertHE, DipHE NVQ Lv4-5, Foundation Degree
Degree	Level 6-7 (3-6yrs)	NVQ Lv6-7, Bachelors Degree, Masters Degree

Traineeship

A traineeship is a nationally designed programme for 16–24 year olds who have left full-time education and are looking to enter employment or considering an apprenticeship.

A traineeship lasts between 6 weeks and 1 year. During this time, you will gain experience and any qualifications needed for the job role. Alongside this, you will work towards a Traineeship Certificate.

Traineeships do not necessarily include a salary, but depending on the company, you may be able to access various grants or bursaries.



Qualification

Traineeship

Level/Duration

6 weeks-1year

Equates To

Entry Level, Work Experience, Preparation for Adulthood

T-Level Foundation Qualification



A T-Level Foundation Qualification is a one-year course designed to help students develop the skills, knowledge and confidence needed to progress onto a T-Level.

It is ideal for students who are interested in a particular career area but may need additional preparation before starting a Level 3 programme.

The course includes a mix of classroom learning, practical activities and support with English and Maths where required.

Successful completion can help students move on to a T-Level, another Level 3 qualification, an apprenticeship or further training.

Qualification	Level/Duration	Equates To
T-Level Foundation	Level 2 (1yr)	GCSE (Grades 4+), BTEC Lv2, NVQ Lv2

Foundation Certificate



A Foundation Certificate is a qualification designed to help students build the knowledge, skills and confidence needed to progress to higher-level study, training or employment.

It provides a supportive learning environment and combines practical and classroom based learning. Foundation Certificates are suitable for students who would benefit from an additional step before moving on to Level 3 qualifications, apprenticeships or other career pathways.

Successful completion can open up a range of progression opportunities and help students prepare for their next steps.

Qualification	Level/Duration	Equates To
Foundation Certificate	Level 2 (1yr)	GCSE (Grades 4+), BTEC Lv2, NVQ Lv2

Occupational Certificate



An Occupational Certificate is a career-focused qualification that helps students develop the practical skills, knowledge, and behaviours needed for a specific industry or job role.

These qualifications are designed in partnership with employers, ensuring that students learn skills valued in the workplace. Study often includes a combination of classroom learning and practical, hands-on activities, helping students gain real-world experience.

Successful completion can lead to employment, an apprenticeship, further training, or progression to higher-level qualifications.

Qualification	Level/Duration	Equates To
Occupational Certificate	Level 2 (1yr)	GCSE (Grades 4+), BTEC Lv2, NVQ Lv2

Functional Skills



Functional Skills qualifications help students develop the essential English and Maths skills needed for everyday life. They focus on practical, real-world applications such as communication, problem-solving, budgeting and understanding information.

Functional Skills can be studied at different levels. Successfully achieving these qualifications can help students progress to further education, apprenticeships and employment opportunities.

Qualification	Level/Duration	Equates To
Functional Skills Entry Level (1-3)	Level 1 (1yr)	NVQ (Entry Level), ESOL (Entry Level), ELCs
Functional Skills Level 1	Level 1 (1yr)	BTEC Lv1, GCSEs (Grades 1,2,3)
Functional Skills Level 2	Level 2 (1+yrs)	GCSE (Grades 4+), BTEC Lv2, Intermediate Apprenticeship

ESOL Courses

ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) courses help students improve their English, if it is not their first language.

Students develop their speaking, listening, reading and writing skills through practical activities and everyday situations.

Improving English skills can help students feel more confident, succeed in further education or training, and access a wider range of career opportunities.



Qualification	Level/Duration	Equates To
ESOL Entry Level (1-3)	Level 1 (1yr)	NVQ (Entry Level), Functional Skills (Entry Level), ELCs
ESOL Level 1	Level 1 (1yr)	Functional Skills Lv1, GCSEs (Grades 1,2,3)
ESOL Level 2	Level 2 (1+yrs)	GCSE (Grades 4+), BTEC Lv2, Intermediate Apprenticeship

Music/Dance Grades



Music grades are recognised qualifications that should not be underestimated. Grades in music are available for a wide range of instruments.

Grades in Dance are equally valid and can lead on to higher education diplomas, which can specialise in different styles.

As with Music and Dance grades, they can also offer UCAS points for university applications.

Qualification	Level/Duration	Equates To
Grade 1-3	Level 1 (1+yrs)	GCSE (Grades 1,2,3), BTEC Lv1, NVQ Lv1
Grades 4-5	Level 2 (1+yrs)	GCSE (Grades 4+), BTEC Lv2, NVQ Lv2
Grades 6-8	Level 3 (1+yrs)	BTEC Lv3, NVQ Lv3, A-Level, T-Level

Coaching/Referee Qualifications



Coaching and referee qualifications are sport-specific, very few are transferable, as different sports have different rules and preparation requirements.

However, it is important to note that these qualifications also develop transferable skills that can benefit other sports or careers, such as leadership, empathy, teamwork, and more.

There is also the possibility to do further training, up to higher education and degree level.

Qualification	Level/Duration	Equates To
Level 1 Award	Level 1 (1yr)	GCSE (Grades 1,2,3), BTEC Lv1
Level 2 Award	Level 2 (1+yrs)	GCSE (Grades 4+), BTEC Lv2
Level 3 Award	Level 3 (1+yrs)	A-Level, BTEC Lv3, Advanced Apprenticeship
Level 4+ Award	Level 4+ (1+yrs)	NVQ Lv4+, HNC, Higher Apprenticeship, Degree

University Degree



An academic or university degree is a recognised qualification of higher education study. It is normally undertaken at, or in association with, a university or university centre.

Degrees can be studied either full-time or part-time, in an organised programme made up of modules over a specified number of years.

These are assessed through examinations or project outcomes. Most degrees end with an individually led project that makes up the majority of the final year.

Qualification	Level/Duration	Equates To
Foundation Dgr	Level 1 (1yr)	GCSE (Grades 1,2,3), BTEC Lv1
Bachelor's Dgr	Level 2 (1+yrs)	GCSE (Grades 4+), BTEC Lv2
Combined Master's Dgr	Level 3 (1+yrs)	A-Level, BTEC Lv3, Advanced Apprenticeship
Master's Dgr	Level 4+ (1+yrs)	NVQ Lv4+, HNC, Higher Apprenticeship, Degree

CertHE and DipHE



The CertHE (Certificate of Higher Education) and the DipHE (Diploma of Higher Education) are academic qualifications available in a wide range of subjects.

Each is made up of a selection of related modules chosen by you to achieve your desired outcome. This can include optional modules or add-ons that you can select.

These qualifications are normally delivered by a university or higher education centre and can be studied full-time or part-time, depending on the provider.

Qualification	Level/Duration	Equates To
CertHE	Level 4 (1+yr)	NVQ Lv4, HNC, Higher Apprenticeship
DipHE	Level 5 (2+yrs)	NVQ Lv5, HND, Higher Apprenticeship, Foundation Degree

HTQs



Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) are Level 4 and 5 qualifications designed to help students develop the specialist skills and knowledge.

Developed with employers, HTQs focus on the skills that industries are looking for and combine classroom learning with practical, career-focused study.

They are usually studied after A-Levels, T-Levels or other Level 3 qualifications and can provide an alternative to a traditional degree.

Qualification	Level/Duration	Equates To
HTQ Level 4	Level 4 (1+yr)	NVQ Lv4, CertHE, Higher Apprenticeship
HTQ Level 5	Level 5 (2+yrs)	NVQ Lv5, DipHE, Higher Apprenticeship, Foundation Degree

HNC and HND



The HNC (Higher National Certificate) and the HND (Higher National Diploma) are Higher Technical Qualifications designed to teach practical skills for specific areas, occupations, or subjects.

They are normally taken after A-Levels, in association with a higher education body or centre, and can be studied full-time or part-time depending on the provider.

As vocational qualifications, HNCs and HNDs are industry-led and tailored to meet the needs of specific sectors.

Qualification	Level/Duration	Equates To
HNC	Level 4 (1+yr)	NVQ Lv4, CertHE, Higher Apprenticeship
HND	Level 5 (2+yr)	NVQ Lv5, DipHE, Higher Apprenticeship, Foundation Degree

PhD



A PhD is the highest level of qualification available in higher education.

Students spend several years researching a topic they are passionate about and become experts in that area. Most people study for a PhD after completing a university degree and often a master's degree.

A PhD can lead to careers in research, university teaching and other highly skilled professions, helping students develop advanced knowledge and valuable problem-solving skills.

Qualification	Level/Duration	Equates To
PHD	Level 8 (3+yrs)	NVQ Lv8, Professional Doctorate, Foundation Degree

Other Qualifications

There is a massive array of qualifications, provided by a wide range of different employers and institutions. We have provided a snapshot here, but you can research other courses, qualifications, and options below:

National Career Service

The 'Find a course' hub lets you search for different courses and training options. This includes not just college courses and apprenticeships, but also skills training and advice if needed:

[*nationalcareers.service.gov.uk/find-a-course*](https://nationalcareers.service.gov.uk/find-a-course)

IFATe

The IFATE (Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education) maintains an up-to-date list of different qualifications, arranged by business areas:

[*www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/qualifications/*](https://www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/qualifications/)

Find a regulated qualification

With the massive range of courses available, checking if they are genuine can be a challenge. You can use this website as a tool to verify key information:

[*find-a-qualification.services.ofqual.gov.uk/find-regulated-qualifications*](https://find-a-qualification.services.ofqual.gov.uk/find-regulated-qualifications)



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Have a question or need help?

If you further questions or would like to a speak to the careers team so can contact information below:



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