SO WHAT IS THE FE SECTOR?
A GUIDE TO THE FURTHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN ENGLAND
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- ACL  Adult and Community Learning
- BSL  British Sign Language
- DipHE Diploma of Higher Education
- ESOL English for Speakers of Other Languages
- FE   Further Education
- GCSE General Certificate of Secondary Education
- GFE College General Further Education College
- HE   Higher Education
- HNC Higher National Certificate
- HND Higher National Diploma
- IB Diploma International Baccalaureate Diploma
- ICT  Information and Communication Technology
- ITP Independent Training Provider
- LA   Local Authority
- NSC National Specialist College
- NVQ National Vocational Qualification
- PGCE Postgraduate Certificate in Education
- PGCert Postgraduate Certificate
- PGDip Postgraduate Diploma
- PTP Private Training Provider
- SEND Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
- WBL Work-based Learning
The Further Education (FE) sector is a wide-ranging and remarkably diverse section of the education system. It is made up of many different types of provider and offers a huge range of exciting education and training opportunities.

The FE sector is vast; there are literally thousands of different options available including academic, vocational, and recreational courses. If you are a bit bewildered by it all, you are not alone! It can be difficult to understand how all the different parts fit together. That is where this guide comes in.

Whether you are a school-leaver, an adult returning to learning, a parent, a practitioner or anyone else wanting a basic overview of the FE sector, this guide is for you.

Part One provides an outline of the different types of FE providers, followed by a summary of some approaches to learning that are prominent in the sector. Part Two outlines some of the different types of qualification available.

We hope that this guide helps you to understand more about what the FE sector can offer.
The Different Types of Provider Involved in Delivering FE

- **Employer Providers**
- **Independent Training Providers**
- **Local Authority Providers**
- **Third Sector Providers**
- **FE Sector**
  - **General FE Colleges**
  - **Art, Design & Performing Art Colleges**
  - **Land-based Colleges**
  - **Sixth Form Colleges**
  - **Specialist Designated Colleges**
  - **National Specialist Colleges**

Learning in the FE sector can take place in a range of settings other than the classroom...

**Work-Based Learning (WBL)**
WBL can be delivered by any of the above types of provider.

**Adult and Community Learning (ACL)**
Delivered by:
- • Local authority providers
- • Third sector providers
- • Colleges
**Part 1: THE FURTHER EDUCATION SECTOR**

**FE Providers**

FE providers include any institutions or organisations (other than schools or universities) that receive government funding to provide education and training to people over the age of 16 (some also offer courses for 14 and 15-year-olds). Schools and universities are not part of the FE sector.

There are five different types of FE provider: colleges, Independent Training Providers (ITPs), Local Authority (LA) providers, employer providers and third sector providers.

**Colleges**

This section provides an overview of the different types of FE college. Details of available courses, entry requirements and application processes are on each college’s individual website.

**General Further Education (GFE) Colleges**

GFE colleges are one of the main providers of further education in England. As the diagram shows, GFE colleges outnumber all the other types of college combined\(^1\).

GFE colleges offer a wide range of programmes. They have a strong

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\(^1\) Association of Colleges (2018). Data does not include National Specialist Colleges (NSCs).
focus on supporting you to develop valuable workplace skills through providing technical and professional education and training. Almost all offer apprenticeships and have close partnerships with employers.

As well as vocational (job-based) courses, many GFE colleges offer academic (subject-based) and higher education courses as well as Adult and Community Learning (ACL) classes.

GFE colleges have a wide range of learners studying on a full-time or a part-time basis. Most have completed their statutory education and are over the age of 16. However, some colleges offer courses for 14 and 15-year-olds. GFE colleges also offer adult education courses so there are learners of all ages.

Examples of subjects you could study at a GFE college include:

- Accounting
- Animal care
- Beauty therapy
- Business studies
- Carpentry and joinery
- Drama and theatre studies
- English language
- Hairdressing
- Health and social care
- Hospitality
- Management
- Maths

The above is only a snapshot of the hundreds of courses available at GFE colleges.
Sixth Form Colleges

Sixth form colleges are the second most common type of FE college in England. They cater primarily for the 16-19 age group. Unlike school sixth forms they are not attached to a secondary school.

Sixth form colleges offer a diverse range of courses. The majority of learners at a sixth form college are studying full-time academic courses. However, many now offer vocational courses too. Around two-thirds of sixth form college learners progress to higher education.

Examples of subjects you could study at a sixth form college include:

- Art and design
- Biology
- Business studies
- Chemistry
- Environmental services
- Fashion and textiles
- French
- Health and social care
- History
- Hospitality
- Maths
- Psychology
- Religious studies
- Sport

The above is only a snapshot of the hundreds of courses available at sixth form colleges.
Land-based Colleges

Land-based colleges provide education and training in areas relating to animals, plants, farming, and the environment. They offer courses from entry to post-graduate level.

A combination of hands-on and classroom teaching is provided allowing you to develop both practical skills and theoretical understanding. Many land-based colleges have close partnerships with employers.

Examples of subjects you could study at a land-based college include:

- Agriculture
- Animal studies
- Countryside management
- Equine studies
- Fisheries
- Forestry and arboriculture
- Horticulture
- Tree surgery and management
- Veterinary services
- Wildlife management
Art, Design and Performing Arts Colleges

Art, design and performing arts colleges offer specialist courses for those wishing to pursue a creative career. A range of courses at different levels are offered including entry level courses, higher education courses and short courses.

Learners of all ages can attend art, design and performing arts colleges, although some courses may only be available to school-leavers.

Examples of subjects you could study at an art, design and performing arts college include:

- Art and design
- Contemporary design crafts
- Fashion
- Fine art
- Graphic design
- History of art
- Illustration and animation
- Jewellery design
- Performing arts
- Photography
- Short film-making
- Textile design
Specialist Designated Colleges

Specialist designated colleges are independently founded charities regulated by their own trust deeds (unlike most colleges which are governed by a further education corporation or sixth form college corporation).

Specialist designated colleges have a particular focus on providing high-quality educational provision to the most disadvantaged members of society.

Their remits vary greatly: some provide adult education, others offer specialist provision for learners with learning difficulties and disabilities. Some of the colleges maybe residential. Some focus on particular groups of learners such as those who work at sea or adults with few or no qualifications. There are only a handful of specialist designated colleges in England.
National Specialist Colleges (NSCs)

NSCs (also known as Independent Specialist Colleges) offer specialist support to young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or mental health problems. They employ a much higher number of learning support staff than other provider types and usually have a smaller number of learners.

It is common for NSCs to offer specialist facilities such as sensory, therapeutic, and supported work environments. Some also offer residential provision.

The courses offered by NSCs are extremely varied and many are unaccredited. Many NSCs support learners to develop communication and independent living skills. Some provide a craft and land-based curriculum. Others provide vocational training and offer transition programmes to support learners into employment.

Examples of subjects that may be on offer at a NSC include:

- Art
- Blacksmithing
- Creative and performing arts
- Cutlery making
- Drama
- Gardening
- Glass cutting and engraving
- Horticulture
- Maths
- Music
Independent Training Providers (ITPs)

ITPs are one of the main providers of Work-based Learning (WBL). Working closely with employers, they receive government funding to provide ‘off-the-job’ training; this may include teaching theory, providing learning support, or delivering practical training.

ITPs are often used to deliver training to apprentices on behalf of colleges and employers.

There are a large number of different ITPs in England, varying greatly in size. Some are small and focus on a single area of vocational training such as hairdressing or construction. Others will provide training opportunities across the country in a range of vocational training. ITPs can be in the private or third sector.

Independent Training Providers are sometimes referred to as Private Training Providers (PTPs) or Independent Learning Providers.

Examples of training delivered by ITPs include:

- Advice and guidance
- Business administration
- Childcare
- Construction
- Customer service
- Hairdressing and beauty
- Management
- Retail and commercial enterprise
- Supporting teaching and learning (for teaching assistants)
Local Authority (LA) Providers

Many Local Authorities such as boroughs and local councils provide Adult and Community Learning (ACL) opportunities. They can also be providers of Work Based Learning (WBL).

Employer Providers

Not all employers use an external organisation to provide training to apprentices: some deliver their own ‘in-house’ training. Those that do so are responsible for supporting staff through their qualifications and, as with other types of FE provider, have to comply with standards set by Ofsted.

Third Sector Providers

The third sector refers to non-profit-making organisations such as charities, foundations and community groups.

Third sector organisations are one of the major providers of Adult and Community Learning (ACL). They can also provide academic and specialist courses and deliver specialised training to disadvantaged learners.
Ways of Learning

FE education and training can take place in a range of settings. This section outlines approaches to learning that are prominent in the FE sector: Work-based Learning, Adult and Community Learning, and online and blended learning.

Work-based Learning (WBL)

WBL is an approach to learning that entails working whilst gaining a qualification in a given area. WBL provides genuine work experience, allowing you to apply academic and practical skills and develop skills for employment.

WBL can be delivered by any of the five types of provider outlined above (colleges, ITPs, LA providers, employer providers or third sector providers). ITPs are the most common type of provider.

WBL covers a range of different programmes including apprenticeships, National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and other professional vocational qualifications (Part Two covers these in more detail).

A wide range of training opportunities are available. Some examples of subjects you may study via WBL include:

- Business administration
- Customer service
- Engineering
- Hairdressing
- Health and social care
- Hospitality
- Information and Communication Technology (ICT)
- Leisure
- Management
- Retail
- Travel and tourism
Adult and Community Learning (ACL)

Adult and Community Learning (ACL) provides accessible learning opportunities for people from all backgrounds and of all abilities. Sometimes referred to as ‘community learning’, ACL is delivered by LAs, third sector providers and colleges.

You may choose to learn with ACL for a range of different reasons such as learning new skills or preparing for higher level study. You may be returning to education after a break, changing career, or simply wanting to learn alongside others in the community.

Most ACL learners study on a part-time basis, taking short courses that last for a set period of weeks. Classes can take place at a range of locations in the community, either during the day or in the evening. They can also take place online.

ACL offers a range of learning opportunities, many of which are suitable for beginners. ACL can include vocational, academic, recreational and life skills courses. Some programmes may be unaccredited, meaning that learners are not working towards a formal qualification. Some providers offer courses specifically for those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

Examples of ACL courses include:

- English and maths
- English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)
- Family learning
- Healthy cooking on a budget
- Beginner computer courses
- Languages e.g French, Spanish
- Skills-based courses that support people in employment
- Yoga and mindfulness
- British Sign Language (BSL)
- Counselling
- Nail technology and beauty
- Customer care
- Working with children
Online and Blended Learning

**Online learning** refers to the process of learning using the internet. It may involve online interaction with tutors and other learners via online lectures, ‘webinars’ or chat forums. Many providers now offer online courses as an alternative to traditional face-to-face teaching.

**Blended learning** is an approach to education that combines face-to-face learning with computer technology. For example, you may be required to complete an online activity prior to a class or training session.

Both online learning and blended learning involve a greater degree of flexibility than traditional learning approaches, enabling you to learn a time and place that suits you.
There are a large number of different qualifications on offer in the FE sector and the choice can seem quite overwhelming! This section provides an outline of the different types of accredited courses on offer, to help you get to grips with the options available.

**Qualification Levels**

Most qualifications have a difficulty level ranging from Entry level up to Level 8. The higher the number, the more difficult the qualification is.

- ‘Entry level’ is divided into three sub-levels (entry level 1, 2, and 3). This level of study offers a basic introduction to a subject area and may be the best option for those with no formal qualifications.
- Level 1 qualifications are more advanced than entry level and are equivalent to GCSE grades D-G or 3-1.
- Level 2 qualifications provide a more in-depth understanding of a subject and are equivalent to GCSE grades A*-C or 9-4.
- Level 3 qualifications offer more specialised, advanced learning and are equivalent to A Levels. This level is usually required for entry to university or certain job roles.
- Level 4 and above is referred to as ‘higher education’ (HE). Many FE providers now offer HE courses.

The diagram on the next page shows many of the different qualifications that are available in the FE sector and at what levels they can be studied.
# Qualifications in the FE Sector

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**Key**
- Vocational / Technical: job-focused
- Intermediate: Grades 3-1 / D-G
- Academic: subject-focused
- Advanced: Grades 9-4 / A*-C
- Higher: Grades 9-4 / A*-C
Study Programmes

All 16 to 19-year-old learners are now required to work towards a personalised study programme consisting of:

- **Main qualification**: This can be either academic or vocational.
- **Work experience**: This can take various forms such as work placements, participation in social action or volunteering.
- **English and maths** - If you don’t have a grade C / 4 or above in either GCSE English or GCSE Maths (or equivalent) you will continue these subjects as part of your study programme.
- **Non-qualification activity**: These are activities to develop confidence and/or life skills. This may involve participating in group work, tutorials or seminars.
- **Progression support**: Support to achieve future goals will be provided, whether continuing in education or seeking employment.

Every study programme has a core aim: either the study of a particular qualification(s) or preparation for employment.

Study programmes are designed to be full-time. However, part-time study programmes may be agreed in certain circumstances.

All learners, including those with SEND, will be supported to develop a study programme that is suited to their individual needs.
**Apprenticeships**

An apprenticeship is a form of Work-based Learning. It involves working a minimum of 30 hours per week whilst receiving a formal programme of training. Apprenticeships can take two to four years to complete. They are a great opportunity to learn new skills whilst earning money and gaining hands-on experience in your chosen field.

Your ‘off-the-job’ training will usually be provided by an external organisation such as a college or ITP, although some employers provide their own. You may get a study day each week (day release) or complete your training in blocks of time. Training may take place in a classroom, online, or a combination of both.

Your training provider will work closely with your employer to create a detailed training plan. You can expect regular progress reviews as well as ongoing mentoring and support.

There are more than 100 apprenticeship types available spanning Levels 2-7. Entry requirements vary. Young people aged 16-24 who lack the necessary skills and experience for an apprenticeship can study a six-month ‘traineeship’ in preparation.

For more information on apprenticeships:

- [apprenticeships.org.uk](http://apprenticeships.org.uk)
- [getingofar.gov.uk](http://getingofar.gov.uk)

If you choose to enrol on an apprenticeship you could be working towards a range of vocational qualifications such as awards, certificates, diplomas or NVQs (these are outlined in the section on vocational qualifications).
Traineeships

A traineeship is an education and training programme designed to help young people (aged 16 to 24) to move on to an apprenticeship or job.

It consists of three main parts: a work placement, work preparation training and English and maths (if you have yet to achieve GCSEs at grade C or 4, or equivalent).

For more information on traineeships: gettingofar.gov.uk/traineeships

Supported Internships

Supported internships are a type of study programme for young people (aged 16 to 24) with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

Supported internships are unpaid and last for at least six months, with most learning taking place in the workplace. You will be provided with more intensive support than would be available under a traineeship or apprenticeship. There are no entry requirements other than commitment, enthusiasm and a desire to work. If you don’t yet have GCSE grade C/4 or above (or functional skills equivalent), you will continue studying these subjects alongside your internship.
Vocational Qualifications

Sometimes referred to as ‘professional’ or ‘technical’ qualifications, vocational qualifications are designed to recognise a learner’s skills, knowledge and understanding in a particular industry or area of employment. Generally speaking, learning is more practical and job-focused than with academic qualifications.

All of the qualifications mentioned in this section are available to young people over the age of 16 as well as adult learners. Entry requirements vary greatly depending on the level of study, the provider and the particular course you are interested in. You will need to check the course details on the provider’s website to find out.

Some examples of vocational subjects include:

- Applied science
- Art and design
- Business
- Business administration
- Childcare
- Construction
- Customer service
- Engineering
- Hairdressing
- Health and social care
- Hospitality
- Management
- Performing arts
- Retail
- Sports science
- Travel and tourism
Awards, Certificates and Diplomas

Awards, certificates and diplomas tend to be job-related (there are some exceptions to this) and are designed to develop knowledge, understanding and practical skills for employment. Teaching is mainly classroom-based, although many courses include a work placement.

Studying towards one of these qualifications can help to enhance your career prospects. On completion, many people move straight into work or choose to study at a higher level at college or university.

**Awards** can be studied at any level. They are more concise than certificates and diplomas of the same level. On completion of an award you may have the option to continue studying towards a certificate or a diploma, or to study at a higher level.

**Certificates** involve more in-depth study of a topic than awards of the same level. They provide a broad base of knowledge and skills. They can also be studied at any level. On completion of a certificate you may have the option to continue studying towards a diploma, or to study at a higher level.

**Diplomas** are the most comprehensive of the three. They offer an extensive programme of learning, allowing you to learn more about a subject than awards and certificates of the same level. They can also be studied at any level.

All three may be taken as stand-alone courses, alongside other (academic or vocational) qualifications, or as part of a wider programme such as an apprenticeship.

There is a vast range of different awards, certificates and diplomas covering many different subjects and vocational areas. Courses usually take one or two years to complete, or longer if studying part-time.
Higher National Certificates / Diplomas (HNCs / HNDs)

These are HE qualifications designed to provide you with specialist skills relevant to your chosen career. HNC and HND courses often cover the same subjects but in different levels of depth.

An HNC is a Level 4 qualification. It is equivalent to the first year of a bachelor’s degree. It takes one year of full-time study to complete (longer if studying part-time).

An HND is a Level 5 qualification. It is equivalent to two-thirds of a bachelor’s degree. It takes two years of full-time study to complete (longer if studying part-time.)

HNCs and HNDs can lead directly to a career. Alternatively, you may opt for further study. An HNC can be topped up to an HND by studying for a further year. An HND can be converted to a full bachelor’s degree (Level 6) via a top up course.

Teaching tends to be classroom-based but with a greater focus on practical learning than is the case with academic qualifications. You may be required to complete a work placement.

Assessment usually takes place through a combination of assignments, projects and practical tasks.

Certain qualifications (Level 3 or higher) will be required if you wish to study for an HNC or HND.

Other Certificates and Diplomas

There are other types of certificate and diploma on offer. You may choose to study a national certificate or diploma (Level 2-3), or a graduate / postgraduate certificate or diploma (Level 6/7). All entail practical study and provide hands-on experience in your chosen field.

As a general rule, a diploma entails more in-depth study than a certificate of the same level. On completion you may choose to go straight into work or study at a higher level. The table on page 18 shows the level of study for each qualification.
Awards, certificates, diplomas and apprenticeships are offered by a range of different awarding bodies. The ‘awarding body’ is the organisation that designs the qualification you are working towards.

Some awarding bodies offer branded qualifications. For example, you may have heard of a ‘BTEC’ diploma or a ‘Cambridge Technical’ certificate.

Sometimes courses are referred to by the name of the brand or awarding body and the level of study without the word ‘award’, ‘certificate’ or ‘diploma’ being used at all. This can be confusing! The important thing to remember is that these are just different types of award, certificate or diploma. Below are some examples.

**BTECs**

BTEC (standing for Business and Technology Education Council) is one of the most prominent qualification brands in England.

There is a range of different BTEC qualifications. These include:

- **BTEC Firsts**: Level 2 qualifications, equivalent to GCSEs.
- **BTEC Nationals**: Level 3 qualifications, equivalent to A Levels.
- **BTEC Apprenticeships**: available at Levels 2 to 5

BTECs are made up of units. Assessment is through assignments, set tasks and/or tests. BTECs are available in many different subjects, across a range of sectors. They can be taken alongside, or instead of, A Levels. They are recognised by both employers and universities.

For more information on BTECs: [qualifications.pearson.com/en/home.html](http://qualifications.pearson.com/en/home.html)

**Cambridge Nationals and Cambridge Technicals**

Both of these qualifications adopt a practical approach to learning and assessment. There are a wide range of subjects to choose from.

- **Cambridge Nationals**: Level 1 - 2 qualifications, equivalent to GCSEs
- **Cambridge Technicals**: Levels 2 - 3 qualifications, equivalent to A Levels.

Both qualifications are made up of units, allowing you to specialise in the subject areas that interest you most.

For more information on Cambridge nationals and Cambridge technicals: [ocr.org.uk/qualifications](http://ocr.org.uk/qualifications)
National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs)

NVQs are practical, work-based qualifications ranging from Level 1 up to Level 7. In order to enrol on an NVQ you must be employed in your field of study — you might be a full-time employee or a learner with a work placement or a part-time job.

You will be assessed in relation to your ability to meet certain work-related tasks called ‘competencies’. Assessment takes place through observation; an assessor will watch you work and assess whether you can do the task in question. You will also be required to produce a portfolio of work.

NVQs are flexible. There is no time limit to complete an NVQ but it usually takes around a year to complete an NVQ at Levels 1 and 2. Level 3 and above may take longer.

NVQs can be based in a college, school, or workplace. Training can also take place via online or blended learning.

NVQs cover a wide range of subjects. There are no age limits and no special entry requirements. You can start at a level that suits you.

An NVQ can be a great way to prove your professional skills to employers. On completion of an NVQ you may choose to progress to the next level of study. Completing an NVQ Level 3 opens up the possibility of studying a higher education course such as an HNC or HND.

Foundation Degrees

A foundation degree offers a combination of workplace learning and academic study. It is a Level 5 qualification, equivalent to an HND or two thirds of a bachelor’s degree. Completing a foundation degree usually takes two years, longer if studying part-time. A foundation degree can be converted to a full bachelor’s degree (Level 6) via a top up course.

There are no set entry requirements; company training and relevant work experience are taken into consideration as well as formal qualifications. They are often chosen by learners who want to work and study at the same time.
Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE)

A PGCE is a teacher training programme. It is the same level as a master’s degree (Level 7). It is one of several routes into a career in teaching. It is a challenging, intense course which takes nine months of full-time study, longer if studying part-time.

Teaching tends to be classroom-based; you will also complete a work placement. Entry requirements vary, but previous Level 6 qualifications will be required as a minimum. If you want to teach in a secondary school you will usually need an undergraduate degree in the subject you wish to teach.

NB. A Postgraduate Certificate of Education is different to a Professional Graduate Certificate of Education, which is a Level 6 qualification for those wishing to teach in FE sector (see below).

Routes into FE teaching:

There are several routes into FE teaching. You will need a minimum of a Level 3 qualification in the subject area you wish to teach. You will also need a teaching qualification relevant to the level of responsibility that you have in your role. Employers can set their own entry requirements.

A range of different teaching qualifications are available:

- Level 3 Award in Education and Training
- Level 4 Certificate in Education and Training
- Level 5 Diploma in Education and Training (The full teaching qualification for the sector)
- Level 5 Diploma in Education and Training including a specialist pathway
- Level 5 integrated specialist diplomas
- Level 5 standalone specialist diplomas

A Professional Graduate Certificate in Education is a Level 6 qualification (similar to a Postgraduate Certificate in Education) specifically for people wishing to teach in the FE sector.

For more information on the above qualifications and routes into FE teaching: feedvice.org.uk/i-want-work-fe-skills-sector
T Levels and Applied Generals

In order to simplify the current system, two new categories of vocational qualification are due to be introduced in 2020: T Levels and applied generals.

A T Level or ‘Tech Level’ is a Level 3 study programme. T Levels are taken over two years and are available to both young people over the age of 16 and adults.

T Levels are intended as a technical alternative to A Levels. They are college-based but involve a work placement. They will become increasingly available in a range of industries such as accounting, agriculture, construction, engineering or IT. T Levels have a strong emphasis on supporting learners to develop the technical knowledge and practical skills needed for their chosen occupation.

For more information on T Levels:

gov.uk/government/publications/introduction-of-t-levels

‘Applied general’ is a new category of Level 3 vocational qualification. Like T Levels they are taken over two years and are available both to young people over the age of 16 and adults.

Applied general qualifications cover broader subject areas than T Levels. Rather than focusing on a specific occupation, learners are supported to develop transferable skills in areas such as science, business or sport. Applied general qualifications feature more applied learning than their academic equivalents.

Upon completion of a T Level or an applied general qualification, learners will be able to progress to higher education, complete a higher apprenticeship, or start work.
While vocational qualifications tend to focus on the development of specific, work-related skills, academic qualifications focus more on developing knowledge and understanding in a particular subject area. Examples of academic subjects include:

- Biology
- Chemistry
- Economics
- English language
- English literature
- Geography
- History
- Maths
- Modern foreign languages (e.g. French, German, Spanish)
- Physics
- Psychology
- Sociology
- Religious studies

Academic courses from Level 1-3 usually involve study across a range of different subjects whereas study at Level 4-8 usually involves specialising in a particular subject area. As well as leading on to further academic study, academic qualifications can lead to higher level vocational qualifications or directly to employment (some professions require specific academic qualifications). Completing an academic qualification will also enable you to develop valuable transferable skills so can be a good option if you are undecided about what to do career-wise.

Entry requirements vary greatly depending on the level of study, the provider, and the particular course you are interested in. You will need to check the course details on the provider’s website to find out.
**Functional Skills**

Functional Skills are qualifications in English, maths and ICT. There are five levels (from entry level 1 through to Level 2). Sometimes they form part of a study programme for those needing to develop their maths and English skills.

**GCSEs**

GCSE stands for General Certificate of Secondary Education. These are subject-based qualifications taken by most people in England at the end of year 11 as well as by many adult learners.

GCSEs are Level 1-2 qualifications (depending on what grade is achieved). They are assessed by exams, coursework, or a combination of both.

With a large number of subjects available, GCSEs provide a solid foundation for further academic and vocational study and for employment. A grade C / 4 in English and maths is a prerequisite for many jobs and courses.

A new grade scale has recently been introduced for GCSEs which runs from 9 (the highest) to 1 (the lowest). The table shows how the new grading structure compares with the previous system.

For more information on the new GCSE grading system:

[.gov.uk/government/publications/gcse-new-grading-scale-factsheets](gov.uk/government/publications/gcse-new-grading-scale-factsheets)

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(A DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION, 2018)

**A Levels and AS Levels**

A Levels and AS Levels are Level 3 academic qualifications available to adult learners as well as school-leavers. A Level stands for ‘Advanced Level’. They entail more in-depth study than GCSEs. You usually study
three subjects or more at the same time over a two-year period (full-time). AS Levels are the same difficulty as A Levels but are more concise. They only take one year of full-time study to complete.

A and AS Levels are qualifications requiring rigorous academic study. Assessment is usually by examination at the end of the course. There is a wide range of subjects available. Some people choose to take A Levels alongside other qualifications.

Successful completion of AS and A Levels opens up the possibility of higher education study at college, university or online. AS and A Levels are recognised by many employers.

**International Baccalaureate (IB) Diplomas**

This internationally recognised Level 3 diploma programme is offered by some providers as an alternative to A Levels. It is a programme aimed at learners aged 16-19 who want to study at HE level. IB diplomas are recognised by many employers.

An IB diploma involves a wider range of study than A Levels. You will study six subjects over a two-year period (full-time).

For more information on the IB diploma:

[ibo.org/programmes/diploma-programme](http://ibo.org/programmes/diploma-programme)

**Cambridge Pre-U**

The Cambridge Pre-U is a Level 3 academic qualification designed to prepare learners aged 16-19 for higher education. The course can either result in a certificate or a diploma. It is offered by some providers as an alternative to A Levels. It can also be taken alongside other qualifications.

There are 24 principal subjects available. Up to four subjects can be studied at the same time over a two-year period. Assessment is by exam at the end of the course. As well as leading on to higher education, Cambridge Pre-U are recognised by employers around the world.

For more information on Cambridge Pre-U:

[cambridgeinternational.org/programmes-and-qualifications/cambridge-advanced/cambridge-pre-u](http://cambridgeinternational.org/programmes-and-qualifications/cambridge-advanced/cambridge-pre-u)
Certificates / Diplomas of Higher Education (CertHE / DipHE)

A Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE) is the academic equivalent of an HNC, whereas a Diploma of Higher Education (DipHE) is the academic equivalent of an HND.

A CertHE is a Level 4 qualification, equivalent to the first year of a bachelor’s degree. It takes one year of full-time study to complete (longer if studying part-time).

A DipHE is a Level 5 qualification, it is equivalent to two-thirds of a bachelor’s degree. It takes two years of full-time study to complete (longer if studying part-time.)

The teaching is at the same level as a bachelor’s degree but the courses are shorter. If you withdraw early from a bachelor’s degree you may be awarded a CertHE or DipHE. They can also be taken as stand-alone courses.

Access to Higher Education Diplomas

This Level 3 course prepares mature learners (aged 19+) for HE level study (such as a bachelor’s degree or HNC). Access courses take a year of full-time study to complete. They are available in a range of subjects and are often taken by people who have been out of education for a while.

Each course has specific entry requirements. ‘Pre-access’ courses are also available for those that don’t meet the entry requirements.

For more information on access courses: accesstohe.ac.uk
Bachelor's Degrees

Commonly referred to as an ‘undergraduate degree’ or simply as a ‘degree’, a bachelor’s degree is a Level 6 academic qualification.

Most people associate studying a degree with going to university, but many FE colleges now offer bachelor’s degrees as well. There are a wide range of subjects available.

A bachelor’s degree usually takes three years of full-time study to complete, longer if studying part-time or if the course includes a year abroad or a work placement.

There are different types of bachelor’s degree, the most common being a ‘Bachelor of Arts’ (BA) or ‘Bachelor of Science’ (BSc). Degrees can be completed with or without ‘honours’ (Hons); a degree with honours entails a substantial project or dissertation in the final year.

People of any age can study a bachelor’s degree, as long as the entry requirements are met; previous Level 3 qualifications will be required as a minimum.

Having a degree can help you in your career or go on to higher level study. Because it is subject-based, a degree tends to be more versatile than a vocational qualification.

Master’s Degrees

A master’s degree is the next level up from a bachelor’s degree (Level 7). This is a high level of academic study which allows you to specialise in a given subject area. They can be either taught or research-based. A taught master’s usually entails studying a range of ‘modules’ and completing a dissertation.

As with bachelor’s degrees there are different types, such as a ‘Master of Arts’ (MA) or ‘Master of Science’ (MSc). Master’s courses usually take one to two years to complete, or longer if studying part-time.

A master’s can enhance your career prospects as well as opening up the possibility of studying a PhD, the highest level of academic study possible (Level 8).

Master’s courses are fast-paced and require intense study. Entry requirements vary, but previous Level 6 qualifications are likely to be required.
USEFUL WEBSITES

▪ Association of Colleges
  aoc.co.uk

▪ Access to Higher Education
  accesstohe.ac.uk

▪ Education and Training Foundation
  et-foundation.co.uk

▪ Get In Go Far
  getingofar.gov.uk

▪ National Apprenticeship Service
  apprenticeships.org.uk

▪ National Careers Service
  nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk

▪ National Land Based College (NLBC)
  nlbc.uk

▪ Natspec
  natspec.org.uk

▪ Ofqual Register
  https://register.ofqual.gov.uk/

▪ UCAS Qualification Information Profiles
  qips.ucas.com/
REFERENCES


UCAS (no date) *UCAS' guide to apprenticeships*. Available at: https://www.ucas.com/file/128711/download?token=CerRViTx.
