



# **SO WHAT IS THE FE SECTOR?**

## **A GUIDE TO THE FURTHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN ENGLAND**

# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>Vocational Qualifications</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Part 1: The Further Education Sector</b>	<b>6</b>	Awards, Certificates and Diplomas	28
<b>FE Providers</b>	<b>7</b>	Higher National Certificates / Diplomas (HNCs / HNDs)	29
Colleges	7	Other Certificates and Diplomas	30
General Further Education (GFE) Colleges	8	Technical Certificates	30
Sixth Form Colleges	9	Technical Levels (Tech Levels)	30
Land-based Colleges	10	Applied Generals	30
Art, Design and Performing Arts Colleges	11	T Levels	32
Specialist Designated Colleges	12	National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs)	32
National Specialist Colleges (NSCs)	13	Foundation Degrees	33
Independent Training Providers (ITPs)	14	Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE)	33
Local Authority (LA) Providers	15	<b>Academic Qualifications</b>	<b>34</b>
Employer Providers	15	Functional Skills	35
Third Sector Providers	15	English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)	35
Adult Community Education (ACE) Providers	16	GCSEs	36
Local Authority ACE Providers	17	A Levels and AS Levels	37
Institutes for Adult Learning	18	International Baccalaureate (IB) Diplomas	37
Third Sector ACE Providers	18	Cambridge Pre-Us	38
<b>Ways of Learning</b>	<b>19</b>	Access to Higher Education Diplomas	38
Work-based Learning (WBL)	19	Certificates / Diplomas of Higher Education (CertHE / DipHE)	39
Online and Blended Learning	20	Bachelor's Degrees	39
<b>Part 2: Qualifications</b>	<b>21</b>	Master's Degrees	40
<b>Qualification Levels</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>Routes into FE teaching</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Study Programmes</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>Useful websites</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>Apprenticeships</b>	<b>25</b>		
<b>Traineeships</b>	<b>26</b>		
<b>Supported Internships</b>	<b>26</b>		

# List of abbreviations

- **ACE** Adult Community Education
- **AEB** Adult Education Budget
- **BA** Bachelor of Arts
- **BSc** Bachelor of Science
- **BSL** British Sign Language
- **BTEC** Business and Technology Education Council
- **CertHE** Certificate of Higher Education
- **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
- **IT** Information Technology
- **ICT** Information and Communication Technology
- **ITP** Independent Training Provider
- **LA** Local Authority
- **MA** Master of Arts
- **MSc** Master of Science
- **NSC** National Specialist College
- **NVQ** National Vocational Qualification
- **Ofqual** The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation
- **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

# Introduction

**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.**



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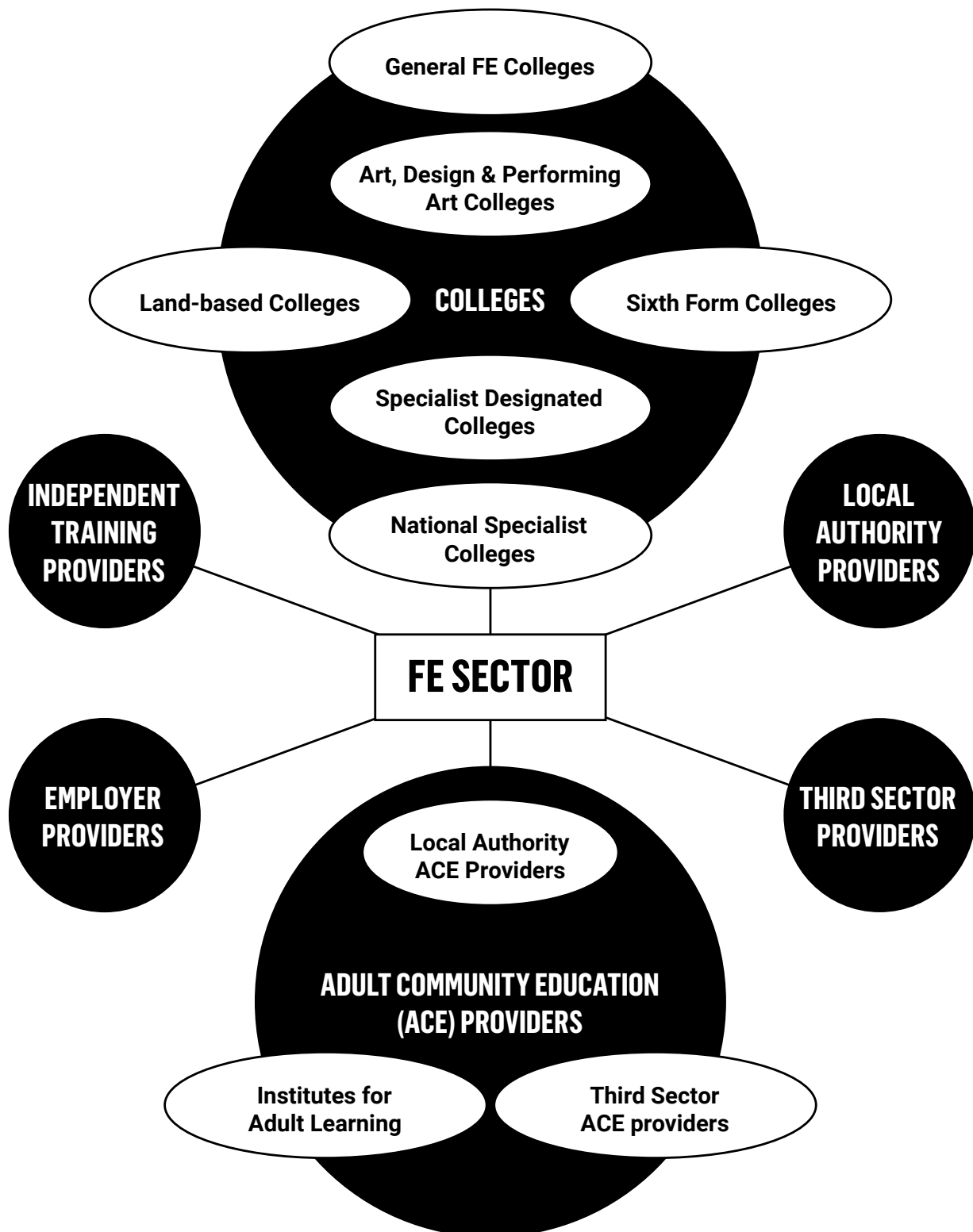
The FE sector is vast; there are literally thousands of different options available including academic, vocational, and recreational courses. If you are a bit bewildered by it all, you are not alone! It can be challenging to understand how all the different parts fit together. That is where this guide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

# The Different Types of Provider Involved in Delivering FE



# PART ONE: THE FURTHER EDUCATION SECTOR

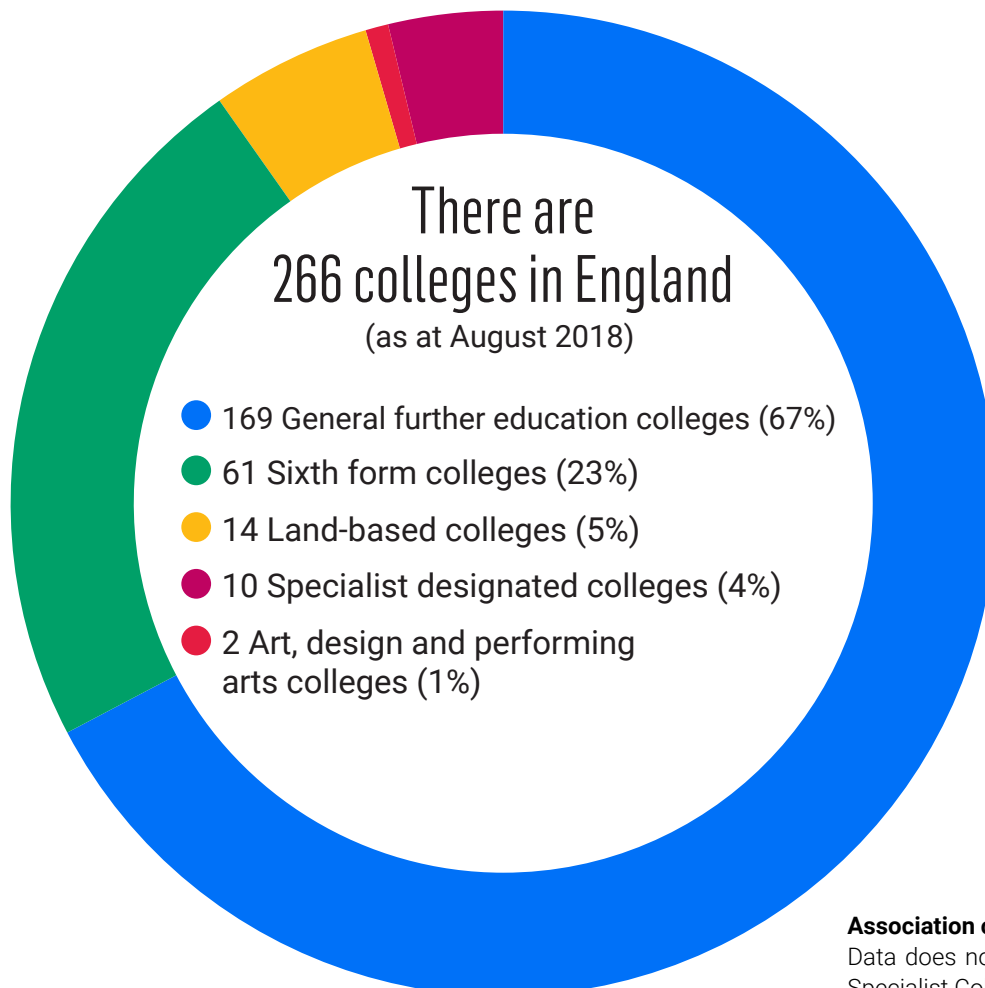
# FE Providers

**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).**

There are six different types of FE provider: colleges, Independent Training Providers (ITPs), Local Authority (LA) providers, employer providers, third sector providers, and Adult Community Education (ACE) providers. Schools and universities are not part of the FE sector.

## 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.



**Association of Colleges (2018)**  
Data does not include National Specialist Colleges (NSCs).

## General Further Education (GFE) Colleges

**GFE colleges are one of the main providers of further education in England and outnumber all the other types of college combined (see diagram on page 7).**

GFE colleges offer a wide range of programmes. They have a strong focus on supporting learners 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 (HE) courses.

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 available 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 available 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 learners to develop both practical skills and theoretical understanding. Many land-based colleges have close partnerships with employers.

Examples of subjects available 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 on offer 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 education to certain disadvantaged groups.

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 an 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 subjects. 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



## Local Authority (LA) Providers

Many Local Authorities such as boroughs and local councils provide adult education opportunities (see next section on ACE providers). 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.

As well as being a type of ACE provider (see next section), third sector organisations can provide academic and specialist courses and deliver specialised training to disadvantaged learners.

## Adult Community Education (ACE) Providers

**There are over 200 Adult Community Education (ACE) providers delivering adult education through a network of centres in every city and town in England, with learning often taking place in community settings, such as schools, libraries, and children's centres.**

ACE providers share a joint mission to enable those often furthest away from employment to progress in life and work. Through providing education, skills and learning they aim to enhance people's employment prospects and wellbeing, improve productivity, and enable economic success.

Most ACE providers offer courses at Level 2 or below, including courses that do not lead to a formal qualification (non-accredited). There are also increasing numbers participating in higher level courses, including Level 4.



Examples of programmes delivered by ACE providers include:

- Supporting learners to get a job or promotion through vocational skills training from Level 1 to Level 3.
- Essential basic English and maths and Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) skills; enabling the most disadvantaged to aid their progression into further learning and sustainable employment.
- English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL); for example, helping refugees and residents improve their spoken English.
- Family learning courses, enabling parents to support their children in learning to read, write and count.
- Programmes that focus on developing independence, social, and employment skills for learners who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities.
- High quality training in mentoring and counselling for learners who require support to get back in to work and require multi-agency support such as those recovering from drug and alcohol misuse.
- Specialist initiatives, for example working with the police service to help learners remove themselves from gang culture and law-breaking.
- Health and wellbeing and arts and culture courses that help individuals to gain confidence, progress to further learning, and create opportunities for social interaction.
- Career guidance and information on individual skills gaps and appropriate learning programmes that will lead to employment in their area.





## Local Authority ACE Providers

**Local Authorities have a key role both as a provider of learning and in partnership with others, including local businesses (in part through local enterprise partnerships), Jobcentres, the voluntary and community sector, and the education and training sector.**

Local Authorities are by far the largest group of providers of Adult Community Education, with around 140 of them receiving Adult Education Budget (AEB) funding. They provide the full range of community education as listed above and are pivotal to many local place-based initiatives. In many towns they also provide education opportunities for 16-19-year-olds and a range of apprenticeship programmes.

They work in partnership and are often the conduit for small specialist community providers to access public funds for their courses. They use a hub and spoke model with a learning centre in the main town or city and outreach facilities in the areas that need support.



## Institutes for Adult Learning

**The Institutes for Adult Learning (the IALs) are nine long established community adult learning organisations who support over 130,000 adult learners (aged 19+) every year.**

At the heart of their offer is equal access to education and learning at every stage of life. They provide a wide curriculum, offering a choice of entry points for people of many different backgrounds and interests.

Students include a high proportion of people from disadvantaged communities who often come to courses with few or no qualifications, as a means of building their confidence to learn, perhaps with the intention of going on to further study for a qualification or to seek work.

## Third Sector ACE Providers

**As well as the list of ACE provision listed, third sector providers offer a wide range of programmes, often filling a gap or working with specific client groups.**

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 two approaches to learning that are prominent in the FE sector: **Work-based 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 learners 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 that can be studied 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



## 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, learners 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 approaches to teaching, enabling learners to study at a time and place that suits them.



A photograph of a woman with short grey hair and black-rimmed glasses, smiling warmly. She is wearing a patterned cardigan and a blue lanyard with 'STAFF STAFF STAFF' printed on it. She is looking towards another woman whose back is to the camera. In the background, another woman with long dark hair is visible, wearing a purple top. The setting appears to be a meeting or a collaborative work environment.

## PART TWO: QUALIFICATIONS

People take qualifications at different stages of their lives and for a wide variety of reasons. There is a large number of qualifications on offer in the FE sector and the choice can seem quite overwhelming!

This section aims to help you get to grips with the options available. It begins by introducing qualification levels and giving an overview of study programmes, apprenticeships and traineeships. Following this, many of the different types of qualification on offer in the FE sector are outlined. The section ends by outlining routes into FE teaching.

# Qualification Levels

All regulated<sup>1</sup> qualifications in England are assigned a level ranging from Entry Level up to Level 8. The higher the level, the more complex and challenging the qualification is. Some qualifications, such as GCSEs, span more than one level.

- '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.

Qualifications at the same level can vary greatly in their content and purpose. The diagram on the next page shows many of the different regulated qualifications that are available in the FE sector and at what levels they can be studied.

Ofqual maintains a register that provides further detail on each qualification: [register.ofqual.gov.uk](https://register.ofqual.gov.uk)



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<sup>1</sup> In England, regulated qualifications are developed and owned by awarding organisations that are recognised by Ofqual. Regulated qualifications include GCSEs, A levels, apprenticeship End-Point Assessments, and a range of technical and vocational qualifications; from Entry Level to Level 8. Degrees offered by universities and colleges (including integrated degree apprenticeships) are regulated by the Office for Students (OfS).

# Apprenticeships and Qualifications in the FE Sector

		Entry Level (1-3)	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	HIGHER EDUCATION (HE)					
						Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7	Level 8	
Certificates	Apprenticeship			I	A	H	H	H	H		
	Degree Apprenticeship										
	Award										
	Certificate										
	National Certificate										
	Higher National Certificate (HNC)										
	Graduate Certificate										
	Postgraduate Certificate (PGCert)										
	Diplomas	Diploma									
		National Diploma									
		Higher National Diploma (HND)									
		Graduate Diploma									
		Postgraduate Diploma (PGDip)									
		Technical Certificate									
		Tech Level									
	Applied General										
	T Level										
	National Vocational Qualification (NVQ)										
	Foundation Degree										
	Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)										
	Functional Skills										
	ESOL										
	GCSE										
	A Level / AS Level										
	International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma										
	Cambridge Pre-U										
	Access to Higher Education Diploma										
	Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE)										
	Diploma of Higher Education (DipHE)										
	Bachelor's Degree										
	Master's Degree										

**Key**

	Vocational / Technical: job-focused	I	Intermediate	-	Grades 3-1 / D-G
	Academic: subject-focused	A	Advanced	+	Grades 9-4 / A*-C
		H	Higher		

# 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:** Learners who don't have a grade C / 4 or above in either GCSE English or GCSE Maths (or equivalent) will continue these subjects as part of their 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 job with training to industry standards and is a form of Work-based Learning. It involves working a minimum of 30 hours per week whilst receiving a formal programme of 'off-the-job' training (making up around 20 percent of the time). Apprenticeships can take one to four years to complete depending on the level. They are a great opportunity to gain job-specific skills whilst earning money and working alongside experienced staff in a chosen field.**

Off-the-job training is usually provided by an external organisation such as a college or ITP, although some employers provide their own. Training is completed either via a weekly study day (day release) or in blocks of time. Training may take place in a classroom, online, or a combination of both. Training providers work closely with employers to create a detailed training plan and provide 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. Learners can begin at Level 2 and progress from one level to another or start at a level suited to their ability and any qualifications they may hold already.

It is important to note that an apprenticeship is a programme of study and work rather than a qualification in itself; it may entail working towards a range of vocational qualifications such as an award, certificate, diploma or NVQ (these are outlined in the section on vocational qualifications)<sup>2</sup>.

For more information on apprenticeships:

- [gov.uk/apply-apprenticeship](https://www.gov.uk/apply-apprenticeship)
- [apprenticeships.gov.uk](https://www.apprenticeships.gov.uk)

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**2** Apprenticeships are currently changing from frameworks, which are qualification-led, to employer-led standards. At present, apprentices are assessed throughout their apprenticeship and have to obtain a number of qualifications usually related to specific units. In the new standards, apprentices are assessed via an end-point assessment which takes place at the end of an apprenticeship.

# Traineeships

A traineeship is not a qualification, but an education and training programme designed to help unemployed young people (aged 16 to 24) to move on to an apprenticeship or job. They are suited to those with little work experience who are qualified below Level 3.

It consists of three main parts: a work placement, work preparation training and English and maths if required. Traineeships are unpaid, but employers can cover travel and expenses. They can last up to six months.

For more information on traineeships:  
[gov.uk/find-traineeship](https://www.gov.uk/find-traineeship)



# 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. Interns are 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. Those that don't yet have GCSE grade C/4 or above (or functional skills equivalent), will continue studying these subjects alongside their internship.

# Vocational Qualifications

Sometimes referred to as 'professional' or 'technical' qualifications, vocational qualifications provide learners with skills, knowledge and understanding related to a particular industry or area of employment. Learning tends to be more practical and job-focused than with academic qualifications. Studying a vocational qualification can support progression into work, further, or higher education.

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 of interest; specific details can usually be found on the provider's website.

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 an individual's 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 learners 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 learners 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 study, allowing learners 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 subjects and vocational areas. Courses usually take one or two years to complete (longer if studying part-time).





## Higher National Certificates / Diplomas (HNCs / HNDs)<sup>3</sup>

**These are HE qualifications designed to provide learners with specialist skills relevant to their 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, learners 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. Learners 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) are required in order to study for an HNC or HND.

<sup>3</sup> These qualifications are likely to be reformed following a government consultation in 2019, the aim being to increase quality, promote take-up by learners, and ensure that they are recognised by employers.

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## Other Certificates and Diplomas

There are other types of certificate and diploma on offer.

Some 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 a chosen field. As a general rule, a diploma entails more in-depth study than a certificate of the same level. On completion learners may choose to go straight into work or study at a higher level. The table on page 19 shows the level of study for each qualification.

## Technical Certificates

A technical certificate is a Level 2 qualification that prepares learners for a job in a specific industry such as construction, social care or hairdressing. Technical certificates also support progression to tech levels.

## Technical Levels (Tech Levels)

A tech level<sup>4</sup> is a Level 3 qualification that allows learners to develop the specialist knowledge and skills needed for a specific industry or particular job such as engineering, IT or accounting. During the course of study learners participate in meaningful activity with employers such as work placements or projects. Tech levels can lead to skilled employment or further technical study.

## Applied Generals

An Applied General<sup>5</sup> is a Level 3 qualification designed to equip learners with transferable knowledge and skills. The qualification focuses on a vocational area rather than a single occupation, for example applied science, business or sport. Upon completion of an Applied General qualification, learners can progress to higher education, complete a higher apprenticeship, or start work.

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**4 5** These qualifications won't usually have 'Tech Level' or 'Applied General' in their title. They are usually known by their brand names such as BTECs or Cambridge Technicals. (See page 31).

## Branded vocational qualifications

**Awards, certificates, diplomas, tech levels and Applied Generals are offered by a range of different 'awarding bodies'. The awarding body is the organisation that designs the qualification. 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 brand names for the different types of qualification outlined in this guide. 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/about-us/qualification-brands/btec.html](https://www.pearson.com/en/about-us/qualification-brands/btec.html)

### Cambridge Nationals and Cambridge Technicals

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

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

Both qualifications are made up of units, allowing learners to specialise in whichever subject areas are of greatest interest to them.

For more information on Cambridge Nationals and Cambridge Technicals:

[ocr.org.uk/qualifications](https://ocr.org.uk/qualifications)

## T Levels

**A new suite of two-year technical courses, known as T Levels, are due to be introduced in 2020. T Levels have been developed alongside employers and businesses so that the content meets the needs of industry and prepares learners for work. They will be available in 25 employment areas including accounting, agriculture, construction, engineering and IT.**

T Levels will offer a mixture of classroom learning and 'on-the-job' experience during an industry placement of at least 315 hours (approximately 45 days). A technical qualification at Level 3 will be taken during the course. A T Level will be equivalent to three A Levels.

T Levels will be based on the same standards as apprenticeships, designed by employers and approved by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education.

For more information on T Levels:

[gov.uk/government/publications/introduction-of-t-levels](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/introduction-of-t-levels)

## 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 it is necessary to be employed in the field of study.**

NVQ learners are assessed in relation to their ability to meet certain work-related tasks called 'competencies'. Assessment takes place through observation; an assessor watches learners work and determines whether they can do the task in question. A portfolio of work is also required.

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 (see page 16).

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

An NVQ can be a great way to evidence professional skills to employers. On completion of an NVQ learners may choose to progress to the next level of study. Completing an NVQ Level 3 also 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; learners also complete a work placement.

Entry requirements vary, but previous Level 6 qualifications are required as a minimum. In order to teach in a secondary school it is usually necessary to have an undergraduate degree in the given subject.

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 page 41).

# Academic Qualifications

**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 enables learners to develop valuable transferable skills so can be a good option for those who are undecided about what to do career-wise.



Entry requirements vary greatly depending on the level of study, the provider and the particular course of interest; specific details can usually be found on the provider's website.



## Functional Skills

Functional skills qualifications test an individual's skills in English, maths and ICT<sup>6</sup>. 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 skills in these areas.

## English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)

ESOL qualifications are available to help those whose first language is not English to develop and improve their English. They can be taken from Entry Level 1 to Level 3, depending on ability, and are often used to demonstrate competence for citizenship, as well as for study visas and residency.

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<sup>6</sup> Functional skills in ICT are being reformed for 2021 and will be replaced with Digital Functional Skills qualifications.

## 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. There are no formal entry requirements for GCSEs.**

GCSEs are Level 1-2 qualifications (depending on what grade is achieved) and are usually studied full time, taking two years to complete. 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; a grade C / 4 in English and maths is a prerequisite for many jobs and courses. GCSEs are also widely recognised and valued by employers.

A new grade scale for GCSEs which runs from 9 (the highest) to 1 (the lowest) was introduced between 2017 and 2019. The table shows how this scale compares with the previous system.

For more information on the new GCSE grading system see:

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

Ofqual have also produced a guide for employers:

[gov.uk/government/publications/gcse-grades-9-to-1-an-employers-guide](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gcse-grades-9-to-1-an-employers-guide)

GCSE Grading	
New Grading Structure	Old Grading Structure
9	A*
8	
7	A
6	B
5	
4	C
3	D
2	
1	E
	F
	G
U	U

(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. They entail more in-depth study than GCSEs. Learners 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 and can be taken alongside other qualifications.**

A Levels and AS Levels are available in a wide range of subjects and are assessed by exams, coursework, or a combination of both. Successful completion opens up the possibility of higher education (HE) study at college, university or online. A and AS levels are also recognised and valued by many employers. In 2017, they were reformed with updated content and revised assessments designed to better prepare learners for further study or work.

## 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 and is made up of several parts, including skills-based components.**

An IB diploma involves a wider range of study than A Levels. Learners study six subjects over a two-year period (full-time). IB diplomas are recognised by many employers.

**For more information on IB diplomas:**  
[ibo.org/programmes/diploma-programme](http://ibo.org/programmes/diploma-programme)



## Cambridge Pre-U<sup>s</sup>

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<sup>s</sup> are recognised by employers around the world.

For more information on Cambridge Pre-U<sup>s</sup>:  
[cambridgeinternational.org/programmes-and-qualifications](https://www.cambridgeinternational.org/programmes-and-qualifications)

## 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](https://www.accesstohe.ac.uk)

## 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, 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 learners withdraw early from a bachelor's degree they may be awarded a CertHE or DipHE. They can also be taken as stand-alone courses.

## 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.**

Many people associate studying for 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 are required as a minimum.

Having a degree can help learners to progress in their careers 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 a Level 7 qualification – this is a high level of academic study allowing specialisation 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.**

Many people associate studying for a degree with going to university, but many FE colleges now offer master's degrees as well. 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 (longer if studying part-time).

A master's can enhance 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.



# Routes into FE teaching

Teaching in the FE sector can be a versatile and rewarding career, presenting opportunities to work in a range of different roles and working environments. FE teachers may deliver lectures or classroom lessons, tutor small groups, offer practical workplace training and/or provide one-to-one mentoring.

There are several routes into FE teaching. A minimum of a Level 3 qualification in the given subject area is required as well as a teaching qualification relevant to the level of responsibility of the 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:

[feadvice.org.uk/i-want-work-fe-skills-sector](https://feadvice.org.uk/i-want-work-fe-skills-sector)

# Useful websites

- **Association of Colleges**  
[aoc.co.uk](http://aoc.co.uk)
- **Access to Higher Education**  
[accesstohe.ac.uk](http://accesstohe.ac.uk)
- **Education and Training Foundation**  
[et-foundation.co.uk](http://et-foundation.co.uk)
- **National Apprenticeship Service**  
[apprenticeships.org.uk](http://apprenticeships.org.uk)
- **National Careers Service**  
[nationalcareers.service.gov.uk](http://nationalcareers.service.gov.uk)
- **National Land Based College (NLBC)**  
[nlbc.uk](http://nlbc.uk)
- **Natspec**  
[natspec.org.uk](http://natspec.org.uk)
- **Ofqual Register**  
[register.ofqual.gov.uk](http://register.ofqual.gov.uk)
- **UCAS Qualification Information Profiles**  
[qips.ucas.com](http://qips.ucas.com)

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