

# Further Education Options



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In a previous article, we discussed school leaving age. Currently in England, though compulsory education ends at 16, you are required to stay in some form of education until you are 18. This article will discuss your options for further education, and which may be best for you, including academic study such as A Levels, more vocational qualifications such as BTECs, and apprenticeships. Though these are not the only options available, they are the most common.

## Sixth Form

Sixth forms can be separate sixth form colleges or part of a secondary school. Generally, sixth forms offer A-Levels, but some may offer the International Baccalaureate. Some may also offer GCSEs and more vocational courses. Sixth Form education usually lasts for two years.

### *A Levels*

In most cases, in the first year of sixth form you will study four to five AS levels, three of which you will carry on into your second year to get a full A-Level qualification. This is typical but not always the case – some sixth forms may allow you to take less AS levels, and some may allow you to take on more than three full A-Levels.

These will generally be subjects you are used to studying in school, such as maths, literature, sciences and so on. However, there are often subjects that you have not had a chance to study before, such as media, psychology, or law, which is not often offered at GCSE level or lower.

A Levels are a particularly good option if you are not sure what you would like to do in the future, as they are often required by employers and are the most common route into universities.

### *International Baccalaureate (IB)*

A few sixth forms – BBC estimate around 190 in the UK - offer the International Baccalaureate instead of A Levels. This qualification is equally as respected by universities as A Levels, and it is often considered more challenging. This option might be worth considering if you are not sure what you want to do and do not want to be limited to three or four subjects.

The IB requires you to take six subjects, with three of them being at a 'standard' level and three at a 'higher' level. These topics will include:

- Your native language (such as English, similar to lessons at GCSE level)
- A second language (such as French, Spanish, German and so on. Schools have also been known to offer Mandarin and Japanese lessons)
- A Science (Biology, Chemistry, Physics, but can also include astronomy or design technology)
- Mathematics and computing
- An arts subject (Art, drama, music)
- A Humanities subject (History, geography, Psychology)

In addition to this, you will study Theory of Knowledge, which will teach you skills such as how to evaluate information and understand where knowledge comes from. You will also be expected to carry out an extended essay on a topic of your own choosing, and take part in extra-curricular activities, such as volunteering, sports or other hobbies.

The IB may be challenging, but those who take it also find it highly rewarding. When deciding, you should consider your own personal preferences and which route fits your learning style and needs – talking to your local institutions may be extremely helpful.

## College

Colleges may also offer A Levels and some may even offer the IB, but they also offer more job-based qualifications which you are not likely to find in sixth forms. These include BTECs and NVQs (National vocational qualifications) among others, and are especially useful if you have a career in mind. They tend to have a different atmosphere than you would have experienced at school, as most allow you to wear your own clothes and often you will be on a first name basis with your tutors. While sixth forms will often require to stay on the premises during free periods, at college you will normally be in charge of your own time when you do not have a class scheduled. You will likely also be around a larger variety of people, as colleges are open to anyone

over 16, so you will meet people from many different backgrounds.

### **BTEC**

BTECs come in a variety of levels, ranging from level 1 introductory certificates, providing basic essential knowledge to enable you to do a job, to level 7 advanced professional diplomas, which help you develop a detailed a complex understanding of your topic suitable for managers and senior professionals. These can be taken in a variety of industries, such as textiles, hairdressing, hospitality and even aeronautical engineering. Talking to your local college or researching your career of choice will give you an idea of the level of BTEC you will need.

If you wanted to go on to university after your BTEC, your award, certificate or diploma give you UCAS points just as A Levels would. Each level of BTEC is worth a different amount of points, and if this is a path you are considering, you should visit the UCAS website for more information.

### **NVQs**

An NVQ is designed to be studied at a pace that suits you, and can be studied at college, work or even during an apprenticeship. Like BTECs, they come at a number of different levels from 1 to 5 – the higher the level, the more demanding the NVQ is to study. There are over a thousand NVQs in a variety of areas, such as healthcare, education, construction and hospitality. For example, if you wished to work in a nursery or as support staff in a school, you may be required to have a level 3 NVQ in childcare or similar area.

## **Apprenticeships and Traineeships**

Apprenticeships are ideal for people who know what they want to do and learn best from hands-on experience. You can take an apprenticeship in a number of industries, such as arts, engineering and travel, and they typically last for a year or two, though there is no time limit to complete one. During your apprenticeship, you will be working towards an NVQ, BTEC or other equivalent qualification, and you will also be paid at least £2.60 per hour for your work. Apprenticeships are increasingly popular, and if you want to get on-the-job experience alongside your studies, you should look into this path.

If you want to take on an apprenticeship but lack the necessary skills or experience, you may be able to get a traineeship. These are unpaid, but your travel and meal costs are usually covered, and will teach you basic maths and English skills if you need them, as well as training you in the career of your choice. At the end of your traineeship, you will be interviewed for a job or apprenticeship with your host employer if there is a vacancy, or given an exit interview to help you review what you have learnt.

