

CHOICES AT 16+ 2026/27

A helpful guide brought to you by CareerWave

CareerWave

Who is CareerWave?

CareerWave is a professional career guidance company and we work in lots of schools helping young people make decisions about their future

If we work in your school you may get the chance to have a one-to-one meeting with a CareerWave Career Adviser. This is an opportunity to focus entirely on you and better prepare you to make key decisions about your career

Our Career Advisers are all qualified, professional and very approachable. They also follow a code of ethics which ensures that we remain **impartial** (not biased) and come from an **independent** point of view (we do not represent anyone else but CareerWave)





Your career journey

Your career is more than just the job you end up doing or the qualifications you achieve. It is both of these things but so much more

A 'career' is your journey through life and it will take twists and turns. Therefore career conversations involve the awareness of your strengths, the development of your skills, opportunities for you to learn, your growth as a person, your ability to make decisions and, of course, your job

This guide focuses on the next steps of your career journey- the choices you have when you leave school at 16

We hope that you find the following information useful

Which way now?



STAY ON OR SOMETHING DIFFERENT?

At a *very* basic level, your post-16 decision comes down to the following key decision:

- Are you going to stay on and continue learning in a similar way you have learnt throughout GCSEs?
- Or, are you going to learn in a different way?

If you choose to '*stay on*', you will study school-like subjects which might include some you have studied before and/or new subjects

If you choose '*something different*', you can learn about a work sector/industry, learn skills to do a specific job or learn about the wider world of work

For many, similar decisions were made at school a few years ago- whether to choose only GCSE subjects, pick one or two work-related courses alongside GCSEs, or even move to a place that offers a very different way of learning like a University Technical College (UTC) or an alternative education provider

PATHWAYS

1) Academic

A-levels are academic subjects like your GCSEs. Learning usually takes place in classrooms, you gain subject knowledge and then get assessed by exams. The close similarity to GCSEs is why we call this the 'staying on' pathway

2) Technical and Vocational

There are lots of technical and vocational options including T-levels, Apprenticeships, Diplomas and NVQs.

This kind of learning will be changing from 2027 through to 2030. The first V-Levels will be available to study in September 2027 supported by Level 2 Foundation Certificates. Occupational Certificates lead to employment in a specific job.

However, the key fact is all relate to learning about the world of work. Courses tend to be more practical, assessed by coursework and exams, can involve work placements or, in the case of apprenticeships, be real paid work.

Academic

A-LEVELS



A-LEVELS IN A NUTSHELL

- Learn knowledge, facts, theories
- Develop research, problem-solving and communication skills
- Taught in classrooms, laboratories, creative studios
- Exams at the end of 2nd year
- 3 chosen subjects, but could get to pick a 4th or do extra independent study like EPQ (Extended Project Qualification)
- Usually studied at a sixth form (can be a dedicated sixth form college, a school-based sixth form or a college-based sixth form)
- May be possible to study A-levels and vocational subjects alongside each other
- From September 2027, the first V-Levels will be available to take with A-Levels at many sixth forms

WHAT GRADES DO I NEED AT GCSE?

Usually 5 or more GCSEs at 4 and above is an absolute minimum

However, some sixth forms may expect higher grades than this (e.g., 5s and above) and for A-level subjects, like maths, physics and chemistry, they may ask for 6s or 7s

WHAT CAN I DO AFTER A-LEVELS?

University- some degrees require specific A-level subjects, but many do not. Entry requirements change from University to University so should always be checked

Apprenticeship- some Degree Apprenticeships require specific subjects, but many do not. If you do an Intermediate or Advanced Apprenticeship, companies may prefer English and maths at grade 4/5

College- technical Higher Education study e.g., Foundation Degrees, HNC, HND, Degree

Paid work- with training on the job

Technical

T-LEVELS



T-LEVELS IN A NUTSHELL

- Technical qualifications designed by industry for industry
- Courses are found in a wide range of work sectors including engineering, health and digital
- Although related to jobs and industry, there is also a lot of academic learning in the classroom
- This mix of academic and technical learning includes 45 days in a work placement
- T-levels are 2 year courses and are equivalent to 3 A-levels (like A-levels they are Level 3 courses)
- T-levels are taught in Colleges of Further Education and Sixth Forms
- 20 T-levels are available now in a wide variety of work sectors
- From 2028, two more will be available- Social Care and Sport

WHAT GRADES DO I NEED AT GCSE?

Usually 5 or more GCSEs at grade 4 and above is an absolute minimum. However, some T-level providers may expect higher grades than this for certain subjects. For example, a higher grade in GCSE maths may be needed for engineering

If you don't have the grades, the *T-level Foundation Year* is available

WHAT CAN I DO AFTER T-LEVELS?

University- likely in a degree related to your T-level course. However, many degrees do not need any specific subjects so there will be lots of degree options

Apprenticeships- for Higher and Degree Apprenticeships it is likely you will seek a job related to your T-level. However, many jobs do not need specific qualifications so you will have lots of apprenticeship options

College- technical Higher Education study e.g., Foundation Degrees, HNC, HND, Degree

Paid work- with training on the job

Technical

APPRENTICESHIPS



APPRENTICESHIPS IN A NUTSHELL

- Real paid jobs with an employer
- Available at different levels- Intermediate and Advanced levels for school-leavers
- Higher and Degree apprenticeships for students with Level 3 qualifications
- Available in a wide range of sectors, including business administration, digital marketing, engineering, hairdressing, healthcare, science
- You apply and compete for each vacancy
- Industry recognised qualification
- A training provider works with the employer and the apprentice to ensure the qualification is achieved

HOW DO I GET AN APPRENTICESHIP?

Applying for apprenticeships takes a lot of time and effort. Therefore, below are some basics for making a successful application

WHERE DO I SEARCH?

- The gov.uk 'Find an Apprenticeship Service' is where you search and apply for vacancies all year round
- Create an account at www.gov.uk/apply-apprenticeship and search by postcode
- Each vacancy has information about the role, the entry requirements, the company and the training provider
- Contact training providers direct and register your interest in apprenticeships
- Organisations often advertise vacancies on their own website e.g., NHS Jobs
- Use your family and friends networks- this might not get you a job, but it may tip you off about upcoming vacancies

HOW CAN I BE SUCCESSFUL?

To be successful you will have to tell the employer, in an application form or a C.V., that you have the qualifications, skills and qualities that they are looking for. Know what the employer wants and know your strengths

Vocational

including new V-Levels in Digital Systems, Education & Early Years and Accounting & Finance. Plus Foundation Certificates in Digital Systems and Education & Early Years

SECTOR-WIDE COURSES



SECTOR/INDUSTRY WIDE COURSES IN A NUTSHELL

- For those who have a sector or industry in mind e.g., animal care, art & design, business, digital, engineering, health & social care, travel & tourism
- Often known by the name of the awarding body e.g., BTECs, CACHEs, UALs and Cambridge Nationals
- At Level 3 they are the equivalent of A-levels. One year courses are available at Level 2 (sometimes Level 1) if required grades for Level 3 are not achieved
- At Level 3 they can be taken alongside A-levels, mainly at sixth forms, because they come in different sizes e.g., equivalent to 1 or 2 A-levels
- Topics cover knowledge and skills to support progression into lots of jobs within a sector or industry
- Assessed by coursework, but there are exams too
- Work experience with employers and in simulated work environments

WHAT GRADES DO I NEED AT GCSE?

Level 3: usually 4 or 5 or more GCSEs at grade 4 and above, often including English and maths or completion of a related Level 2 course. Level 2: usually grades 3 and 4

WHAT CAN I DO AFTER A SECTOR WIDE COURSE?

The next level- if you are studying at Level 2 or below, you could progress on the same course to a higher level e.g., Foundation Certificate in Digital Systems to the V-Level in the same subject

University- if you achieve a Level 3 qualification a degree is a potential next step. Many degrees do not need any specific subjects so there will be lots of degree options but some people might focus on the same sector or industry

Higher Education at College- technical Higher Education study for those with Level 3 qualifications e.g., Foundation Degrees, HNC, HND, Degree

Apprenticeships- at Intermediate and Advanced level for all learners. At Higher & Degree level for those with Level 3s

Vocational

JOB SPECIFIC COURSES

including new 2-year Occupational Certificates in Early Years Practitioner, Culinary Skills and Hospitality



JOB SPECIFIC COURSES IN A NUTSHELL

- Courses such as bricklaying, professional cookery and hairdressing provide you with the skills to do these jobs at a competent standard
- The qualifications are recognised by employers and the relevant 'trade' sectors
- They are taught at Colleges of Further Education and Training Providers
- Practical, hands-on work is a big part of these courses but there is written portfolio work too
- Therefore a lot of time is spent in workshops, salons & kitchens, and time in the classroom
- Many people choose to go straight into employment after achieving Level 2
- Some will look to study further to Level 3 if they want to gain higher skills or get supervisory roles in the future

WHAT GRADES DO I NEED AT GCSE?

For job-specific courses you will likely learn the basics first and start out on Level 1 or 2

The provider will assess what level you will start on based on previous experience and grades

You must do English and maths if you do not achieve a GCSE grade 4 or above

MAY BE RIGHT FOR YOU IF:

- You want to gain skills for a specific job role or roles that use similar skills
- You have a good idea about the job or jobs you would like to do
- You prefer hands on, practical learning
- You prefer to be assessed by coursework, portfolio and observation
- You want to progress into employment and/or an apprenticeship
- You want to study a new Occupational Certificate in one of 3 occupations: Early Years Practitioner, Culinary Skills and Hospitality

Foundation

FOUNDATION LEARNING & PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT



IN A NUTSHELL

Foundation Learning courses are aimed at those who need extra support. They include:

- Learning at Entry Level and Level 1 in a range of job areas such as construction, hairdressing, cookery, and media. Can try out a number of course options
- Personal Development including life skills
- Functional Skills in English, maths and ICT

Supported Apprenticeships- designed for people with learning disabilities, autism or additional support needs.

Supported Internships- a study programme with a substantial work placement supported by a job coach for students with an Education, Health & Care Plan (EHCP)

Personal Development- short courses (e.g., 12 weeks) such as The King's Trust 'Team' programme and courses offered by Colleges and training providers to support progression into mainstream learning and work

WHAT GRADES DO I NEED AT GCSE?

No previous qualifications are required for Foundation Learning, Supported Internships or Personal Development programmes

Providers will assess your needs and suitability for their programmes

MAY BE RIGHT FOR YOU IF:

- You need extra learning support or personal support to progress
- You need your learning to be more personalised and meet specific needs
- Your school provided on-going support including classroom support and one-to-one support
- You had needs at school that were identified- you may have an Education, Health & Care Plan (EHCP)
- Some 'Foundation' courses may be specifically aimed at students who have an EHCP
- You want smaller class sizes
- Or perhaps you just feel that you need a bit more support before being making a decision (in which case a short development course may be perfect)

Destinations

WHERE TO STUDY NEXT?

SIXTH FORM

This is where A-levels are usually taught. Many Sixth Forms also offer Level 3 technical courses which may be able to study alongside A-levels. New T-levels are also starting to be offered here too

It is important to understand that there are different sixth form experiences available. You can study at a school sixth form, a college sixth form and a dedicated sixth form centre or sixth form college

COLLEGE OF FURTHER EDUCATION

Traditionally colleges are the home of technical learning and therefore they offer lots of courses related to jobs and industry. Colleges offer learning at all levels meaning there is a place and a course for most people

Many colleges also have their own sixth form centre where A-levels are taught. Sometimes you can study an A-level alongside your main technical course. Colleges also work with employers providing apprenticeships, supported internships and personal development programmes

TRAINING PROVIDER

Training Providers typically provide work-based learning and closely work with employers to provide apprenticeships. Therefore, if you want to become an apprentice you are advised to contact local training providers

However, lots of training providers offer some of the same courses as colleges do e.g., construction, hairdressing and childcare. One attraction of doing a course at a training provider is the smaller class sizes and a more informal learning environment

SPECIALIST COLLEGES

There are also many options at Colleges which specialise in specific study areas or provide specialist support. Their focus could be on:

- Art and design
- Engineering
- Land-based courses such as animal science, agriculture
- Special Educational Needs (SEN) such as colleges which offer a supportive learning environment for students with specific support needs



FOR MORE CAREER INFORMATION AND ADVICE VISIT:

www.careerwave.co.uk

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