

The complete guide to A-level, BTEC and International Baccalaureate choices



A-levels, BTEC or IB: What's right for me?

Find out what qualifications are best for your career prospects

There are more choices than ever for people pursuing higher-level studies, with many schools now offering a combination of A-levels, BTECs and the International Baccalaureate (IB), or even all three. All of these offer paths to university or into work, so it pays to think ahead to decide what route suits your aspirations best.

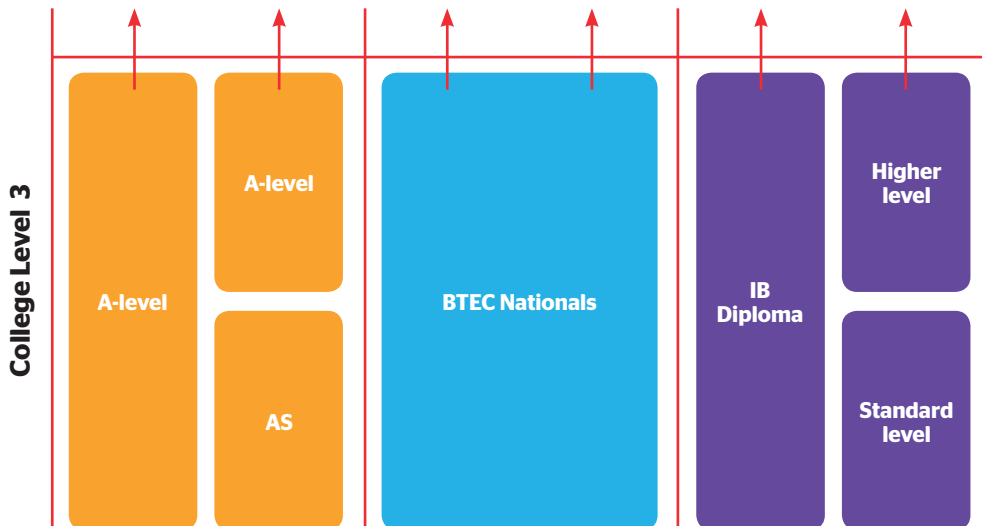
A-level vs BTEC vs the International Baccalaureate

Although A-levels are the most common choice for 18-year-olds applying to university, they aren't the only option out there. For example, in 2018 a little over 10% of 18-year-olds in the UK

applied to university with BTECs alone, while 7.2% applied with a combination of A-levels and BTECs (source: Ucas). Meanwhile, students applying with the International Baccalaureate Diploma made up the second largest group of applicants at Oxford University after A-levels (source: Oxford University website). If your school or college offers them, choosing BTECs or the IB can offer an alternative way to study. The table below shows a quick overview of where they could take you.

So before we dig into what each qualification entails, on page three are a few questions to ask yourself to get a general idea of which one might suit you.

Foundation degrees, undergraduate degrees and degree apprenticeships



What do you want to do later?

If you don't know the answer to this question, don't worry. You don't have to rush into a decision now. But if you do have a rough idea or some possibilities you'd like to keep open, this could play a significant factor in which route you decide to choose.

Which is more flexible?

Picture the scene: you're halfway through your A-levels or BTECs and you change your mind about what you want to do next – it's possible, right? Could you easily switch direction if you wanted to?

While BTECs are quite flexible in the different sizes and levels they come in, they can be quite specific in their focus. As a result, they can pigeonhole you later on.

On the other hand, the A-level route might be a safer choice if you're not sure about what you want to do. This way you can study a few different subjects that interest you now, including some facilitating subjects to keep your options open (more on this later).

How do you learn best?

So you've spent the past 10 years or so sitting in a classroom listening to a teacher talk at the front – are you happy to continue with the same? Would you prefer an emphasis on open discussions and independent study (A-levels) or by applying theory to practical projects (BTECs)?

How do you handle exams?

Everyone approaches exams differently. Some students ace them, making up where they may have lacked the rest of the year. Others struggle, whether it's retaining all that knowledge, or the intimidating exam environment itself (and this even includes high-achieving students).

A-levels are now primarily assessed by

exams, which take place at the end of your second year, while BTECs are assessed more regularly throughout the year through coursework and projects.

Do what's right for you

You hear a lot about A-level results day every summer: morning television, newspapers, messages on social media. If you're a BTEC or IB student, you'd be forgiven for feeling a little underappreciated when you've worked just as hard!

However, try to focus on what is right for you – it is your life after all! Don't be pressured into following the rest of the flock.

KEY THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT FURTHER STUDY

Be realistic: It's going to be hard work. You can expect A-levels to be a significant step-up from studying for GCSEs. Also, be prepared to spend a considerable amount of time per subject outside the classroom – doing set work, reviewing work from lessons, reading and research. And for A-levels and the IB particularly, there is a significant revision load towards the end of Year 13, revising two years' work.

Your choice: Think about choosing subjects you will enjoy. After all, you'll be studying them for two years, in-depth.

Research: Understand what each subject involves – especially any you haven't studied before. In fact, taking a subject at A-level can be a good taster if you're on the fence about studying it at degree-level.

A-levels: Everything you need to know

Find out if A-levels are right for you

A-LEVELS AT A GLANCE

What is it? An 'advanced level' or A-level is a qualification offered across a range of subjects to school-leavers (usually aged 16 to 18), graded A*-E. A-levels are studied across two years. Some schools and colleges may offer the option to study an AS-level for one year.

Assessments: A-levels are now primarily assessed by exams, which take place at the end of your second year. You'll still take exams at the end of your first year, but these won't count towards your final A-level grades. For most subjects, non-exam assessments (ie coursework) only account for 20% or less of your final grade.

Pros: The old way of thinking was that universities preferred A-levels over BTECs because A-levels were more 'academic' whereas BTECs involved more practical elements. While this perception has changed somewhat and BTECs are widely publicised when a university states their entry requirements, there is still a slight bias towards A-levels (for certain subjects at least).

Cons: A-levels tend to be more theory-based and lacking in actual practical skills.

Would it suit me? A-levels are assessed through end-of-year exams. If you're comfortable with exams as the main assessment method, then go for A-levels.

What subjects can you study?

There are around 80 subjects available to study at A-level. However, the options available to you will depend on which subjects your school or college offers. Choosing the right A-level subjects is relatively simple. Subject choice usually comes down to these three factors:

1 You enjoyed and were good at the subject at GCSE level. This is a logical progression to take it to a higher level, but be aware that some subjects are distinctly more difficult at A-level.

2 You need certain subjects to enter a chosen career or course at university. But beware - there can be misconceptions about what you need for certain careers or degree courses.

3 You have not studied the subject before but feel that it will be very interesting or suit your strengths. For example, if you enjoy history or essay-based subjects, politics may be a logical addition.

(Adapted from 'Next Steps' booklet by Andy Gardner, Careers Adviser)



TOP TIP

Get a peek at where your A-level subjects can lead - try our A-level Explorer [which.co.uk/a-level-explorer](https://www.which.co.uk/a-level-explorer).

Our Explorer tool is easy to use and can quickly show you what your degree possibilities are depending on the combination of A-levels you choose. You can also get a taste of the different career paths available to you based on the subjects you pick now – this includes possible jobs and average graduate salaries.

What are 'facilitating subjects'?

Facilitating subjects are subjects that open you up to a wider range of degree courses. They are:

- Biology
- History
- Chemistry
- Maths (and further maths)
- English literature
- Modern and classical languages
- Geography
- Physics

Why are facilitating subjects important?

There are two main reasons:

1 Some university courses ask for specific A-level subjects as an entry requirement. This will often include one or more of the facilitating subjects, so choosing one or two of these keeps your university options more open. For example, many pharmacy degree courses require that students have an A-level in chemistry and either maths, physics or biology.

2 If you're unsure about what you want to study at university, choosing a couple of the facilitating subjects will help to keep options open.

Good combinations of subjects

- Maths will support the study of physics. So if you're equally capable at science and maths, it's always advisable to do both.
- Economics has a number of useful partner subjects (eg geography, politics, maths) as the skills and content have some degree of overlap.
- Biology and chemistry together open many doors to a wide range of degree courses.

TOP TIP

A mix of facilitating and other subjects is fine, and in many cases, ideal. Try to get the right balance by playing to your strengths – after all, you'll need to get the grades at the end.

Essential vs. useful subjects

Some degrees consider certain A-levels as 'essential' and other subjects 'useful'. What is essential or useful can also vary according to the university that you're applying to. Architecture is a good example: some universities require art while others say maths is useful.

Remember, there are many popular degrees open to students regardless of the A-levels they have studied – although grades may still be important for some of these: see our table on the next page for some examples.

- Some courses will require the same subject to have been studied at A-level. Examples

are: English (some will prefer English literature or language, or both), biology, chemistry, mathematics, most modern languages.

- That said, some courses make little or no stipulation about preferred A-levels – for example, business studies, law, philosophy, politics, sociology and surveying.

While proper university research might still feel a long way away, it can't hurt to do some quick browsing to see the sort of thing universities look for on a given subject or course. You can see full entry requirements for all undergraduate courses by searching on Which? University. Search for a course now: which.co.uk/university.

We'd recommend searching for a subject you're interested in and seeing what a dozen or so universities offering that course ask for. This will give you a good idea of any subject preferences, minimum grades or Ucas points you'll need to achieve.



SUBJECT	ESSENTIAL SUBJECT	USEFUL SUBJECT(S)
Accountancy		Maths
Computing	Maths (usually)	Computing, further maths, physics
Economics (most require maths)	Maths	Economics
Engineering	Maths and physics (usually)	
Geology/earth sciences	Two from maths and the sciences	
History	History (almost always)	
Medicine (and dentistry)	Chemistry biology (often essential)	Maths or physics are useful for a few UK courses
Music	Music Grade 7-8 instrument	
Nursing and midwifery	Biology (usually)	Psychology, sociology, chemistry
Optometry	Biology One from maths, chemistry and physics	
Pharmacy	Chemistry and one other from maths, biology, physics usually essential	Psychology
Physics	Physics and maths	
Physiotherapy	Biology (usually)	A second science or maths may be useful
Veterinary science	Biology and chemistry	One of maths or physics recommended for some vet schools

STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

'I didn't do some of the things I loved in order to take subjects that were more desirable to universities, not realising that for the vast majority of students the truth is it's better to have top marks in three subjects you love than mediocre ones for three that are considered good.'

Hal.e.lujah | The Student Room Member

What else to consider

Other entry requirements: Schools and colleges will often look for at least five GCSEs grades 9-4 (A*-C under the old grading system), or equivalent.

Future-proofing: Although you can't know everything, keep as up to date as possible. If you're unsure about anything, contact the university or specific department directly to clear things up.

BTECs: Everything you need to know

Find out if BTECs are right for you

BTECS AT A GLANCE

What is it? A BTEC is a practical-based, vocational qualification that can be studied at a college or school. While commonly known as an alternative to A-levels, BTEC qualifications can be studied at GCSE and degree level too – always check the level BTEC you're taking and what it's equivalent to (and can lead on to).

Assessments For each BTEC, you will complete a series of units – some core, others optional – that are assessed as written assignments, or practical activities. BTECs are graded as a Pass, Merit or Distinction.

Pros They may suit those who don't excel in exam conditions, as they can relieve pressure by spreading work out. BTECs lend themselves to subjects with a practical nature, such as childcare or construction.

Cons Because BTECs focus on one particular area and teach specific skills, you won't really be able to diverge too much from this field later on. As BTECs are more practical, students don't necessarily get the opportunity to sharpen those more academic skills, such as essay-writing, in the same way. You might want to consider combining BTECs with A-levels so that you get the best of both worlds.

Would it suit me? BTECs can be refreshing, especially if you learn best by actually 'doing' rather than simply reading about a subject.

What subjects can you study?

A wide range of subjects can be studied at BTEC level with 2,000 qualifications across 16 sectors. Some have a practical nature, but they also include subjects such as computing, engineering, childcare, construction, media, performing arts, sports science and travel and tourism.

How are BTECs perceived?

In previous years, BTECs were seen as an 'easier' option because of their vocational, less academic nature. However, this criticism is quickly disappearing as more students take this path to university.

University and BTECs

If you prefer modular assessment or vocational types of study, a BTEC may be the right choice for you. While A-levels may have long been considered the most conventional qualification path to university, BTECs could be a viable alternative. In fact, BTEC students achieving good grades are just as sought-after as students with good A-level results: more than 100,000 BTEC students apply to UK universities each year (source: UCAS), and recent data from Pearson finds that 90% of BTEC students are employed full-time after university graduation.

There are two main BTEC pathways to university:

- **BTEC level 3** – this is the equivalent of studying A-levels and provides access to a degree programme.

- **BTEC level 4 HNC and level 5 HND** – these often equate to the first or second year of an undergraduate degree course, allowing you to progress onto university to complete this.

BTECs are the second most common qualification held by 18 year old UK applicants, the latest Ucas End of Cycle report finds, and the acceptance rates for applicants with BTEC continues to rise.

Nearly 79% of 18-year-olds applying to university held either A-levels, BTECs, or a combination of the two in 2018.

Are BTECs equivalent to A-levels?

BTECs are flexible and can be studied at various levels, each of which equates to a different qualification:

- Levels 1-2 = GCSE
- Level 3 = A-level
- Levels 4-7 = Degree

At each level you can usually study an Award, a Certificate or a Diploma (Diploma being the highest of the three).

Level 3 BTEC students can study these (plus BTEC Nationals). These aim to give you the ability to gain and apply knowledge at a level to continue on to university to study this area.

BTECs come in different sizes and can be equal to one, two or even three A-levels. This flexibility means that you can study them alongside A-levels, rather than feel you have to choose one over the other.

What else to consider

Entry requirements: you will usually need at least five GCSEs at grade 4-9 to get on to a level 3 BTEC course.

Future-proofing: if university is in your sights, think about what you may want to study at degree level, as this will have an impact on what BTEC you choose. It can be difficult to switch path once you've begun.



The International Baccalaureate: Everything you need to know

Find out if the International Baccalaureate is right for you

IB AT A GLANCE

What is it? The International Baccalaureate (IB) is an internationally recognised qualification, accepted by UK universities. You choose three principal (higher level) subjects as well as three subsidiary (standard level) ones, together with additional elements such as the Theory of Knowledge essay.

Assessments Assessment is based around coursework and final exams.

Pros Offers a more holistic approach to content. So if you want to specialise in your subjects, A-levels may provide greater depth while the IB offers more breadth.

Cons Students will have fewer free periods and more tutor contact time than most A-level or BTEC students. This option can be demanding, so make sure you are ready for the challenge.

Would it suit me? The IB Diploma can be a great choice for all-rounders, as well as those considering studying abroad later.

What subjects can you study?

For students who want breadth of study, the IB has lots to offer. The programme is academically challenging but encourages personal development too.

IB Diploma students take a broad mix of six subjects to standard level, before continuing

with three subjects to higher level, choosing one subject from each of these groups:

- Studies in language and literature
- Language acquisition
- Individuals and societies
- Sciences
- Mathematics
- The arts.

As well as studying these six subjects, students complete the following as part of the 'Diploma Programme (DP) core':

- study a philosophical 'theory of knowledge' course
- write a mini dissertation-style extended essay
- get involved in sports, volunteering and extracurricular community activities.

Entry rates for 18-year-old students in the UK being accepted into Higher Education with the International Baccalaureate has remained stable since 2008.

Picking your IB subjects

The subjects you choose will make a big difference to your application – and in particular your combination of higher level subjects – as these will usually determine what you go on to study at degree level.

You'll need to make sure you fulfil the requirements of the degree course you want, but also play to your strengths to ensure you get a good result. With degrees that require maths qualifications, for instance – such as maths, some economics and many

engineering courses – you're likely to need higher-level maths as opposed to standard level or maths studies.

If you've got an idea of what you want to study at university, check the entry requirements of specific courses to find out what's expected – search for a degree course or university now on Which? University. IB entry requirements are commonly publicised, so the information is easy to find.

How is the IB perceived?

The IB is internationally recognised, and its required study of a wider range of subjects and emphasis on skills for civil engagement develops well-rounded students. This broad study base makes the IB a good preparation for university-level study; for example, you'll have already written a 4,000-word research report in the Extended Essay component. You can highlight this both in your Ucas application (specifically, your personal statement) and during a university admissions interview.

University and the IB

The structure of the IB means you study a broad range of subject options. This should leave you in a good position when making your university choices, especially if you're not sure what course you want to take, as you'll be keeping your options open (which is nearly always better than opting for a narrower combination of subjects).

Your application will go through the same process whatever your qualifications, and admissions tutors will be familiar enough with the IB to judge your application fairly.

As an IB student, you apply to university courses through Ucas like anyone else – the only difference is the qualifications you list. Universities will often ask for specific results in your higher-level subjects as well as give you a total points target.

Is the IB equivalent to A-levels?

Like A-levels, the International Baccalaureate Diploma is a subject-based qualification that students study over two years. While there isn't a direct parallel between the two, it's safe to assume that if a university asks for a particular subject at A-level in its entry requirements, they're likely to require it at higher level as part of the IB.

Course offers given to IB students may sometimes appear more challenging than offers made to A-level candidates, but that's usually down to how the IB and A-levels are graded: the points scale allows competitive universities to more keenly differentiate between IB candidates.

STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

'The things you do - the extended essay, CAS [the Creativity, Action, Service programme], studying a wide range of subjects and so on - give you distinguishing features to push in your personal statement, as well as better prepare you for university study. Simply being an English student studying the IB may be enough to make you stand out from the pile of applications with A-levels.'

Daniel Penman, former IB student and current University of Cambridge student

What else to consider

Consistently heavy workload: The IB isn't for the faint-hearted. With six mandatory subjects and three core components, you'll need to be a time-management guru in order to keep your grades on track.

Future-proofing: You'll usually be expected to have taken a higher-level in a subject related to the course you're applying for.



Transitioning into Year 12 and 13

Get ready for a change of pace

Moving from GCSE to post-16 study can be challenging. If you understand your strengths and weaknesses as a learner and your preferred learning style, you are likely to adapt more easily and to thrive.

Prepare for new learning

A-levels (or equivalent) are very different to studying GCSEs. Here are some things that Year 12s often find difficult, with advice to help you overcome them:

Independent learning: GCSE learning is often very structured. At a higher level, you need to be prepared to do extra independent reading and research outside lessons (without prodding from teachers), and manage your time much more effectively. You'll probably have other commitments to juggle around your studies too, including applying to university (eg going to open days, writing your personal statement), part-time jobs, learning to drive etc.

How to prepare: Ask successful Year 13 students about how they organise their work schedule and what tips they have that worked for them. For example, did they curb certain activities or commitments during particular periods of the year, such as standing down from any clubs or picking up fewer shifts at their part-time job?

Active participation: Participating actively in learning in the lessons is much more important, as classes tend to be smaller than for GCSE and teachers rightly expect more involvement from you.

How to prepare: You'll feel more confident to

participate if you've swotted up on any required reading material. And remember – no question is a stupid question! If you want clarification on something, it's likely that your classmates do too.

Concepts: Work is inevitably more complex, whatever the subject. It's a big step up for many, with more time to really hone in on particular areas.

How to prepare: Reviewing work after each lesson will help you to consolidate ideas that you are learning about and ensure you've fully grasped it. Don't be afraid to ask questions, seek help from teachers and work collaboratively with other students.

Not only will this kind of preparation work help your transition to sixth form, but it will also get you into some good habits by the time you arrive at university.

Post-16 study: three tips for success

1 Research your subject choices in the summer after your GCSEs. Find a peer mentor or even a study buddy for each one, if you can.

2 Learn how to learn: head onto the Which? University website for a wealth of advice on effective independent study habits like time management and revision techniques:

[which.co.uk/revision-help](https://www.which.co.uk/revision-help).

3 Prepare yourself: make sure you're fully aware about how your qualifications will be assessed and how each course is structured.

What's next?

How do you feel about entering the next stage of your education? Excited? Nervous? Intimidated? It's natural to feel all three when you're embarking on a new challenge.

If you haven't yet decided whether A-levels, BTECs or IB would be right for you, here are some do's and don'ts to consider (and resources to help you!)

DOS AND DON'TS FOR DECIDING ON YOUR POST-16 PATH

DOS:

DO look at what qualifications and subjects are offered by other colleges and sixth forms in the area that your current school doesn't offer. While it may seem terrifying to leave

your comfort zone, in two years you may well be making the much bigger move to uni – this can be good practice for those inevitable changes that life brings!

DO ask yourself what you'll want to do in two years. Use our A-level Explorer to see

what degree subjects will be open to you, based on your combination of the A-level subjects you're thinking of taking.

[which.co.uk/a-level-explorer](https://www.which.co.uk/a-level-explorer).

Not studying A-levels? You can still use our tool by selecting similar subjects to those you're considering studying.

DO look for inspiration in unexpected places. Netflix, passions, family members and part-time jobs can all ignite a spark for that future career. Then, work backwards from there.

DON'TS:

DON'T blindly copy your friend or older sibling: The right path for your best mate

might be wrong for you. A-levels, BTECs and

IBs can potentially all lead to the same degree, but the experience of studying them will be considerably different (and could affect the grades you walk away with).

DON'T forget about extracurricular activities for your personal statement.

Regardless of the qualifications you decide to pursue, think about the experiences that will help you stand out from other university applicants, such as completing the Duke of Edinburgh's Award or reflecting on your Saturday job.

Try our personal statement builder:
[which.co.uk/personal-statement-builder](https://www.which.co.uk/personal-statement-builder).

DON'T think it's too early to have university

in your sights. Students as young as Year 9 subscribe to our free expert tips straight to their inbox. Get study tips, work experience ideas and lots more.

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