

Choosing options in Year 8 or Year 9

Information for parents and carers

Choosing subjects for key stage 4, is the first decision young people will have to make that may affect their career choices in the future.

Key stage 4 is when students study for national qualifications, such as GCSEs. Most students will take these in Years 10 and 11, but in some schools, students start these in Year 9.

This information below is aimed at parents and carers – to inform them about the decisions young people have to make in Year 8 or Year 9. **MyDirections** provides young people with more information about all their options and choices. It also has 'Careers activities' – five lessons that young people can do, to help them with their option choices. For example, in one of the lessons, young people can find out how different subjects link to different jobs.

Individual schools offer different subjects and qualifications at key stage 4, and will produce an **options booklet** with more detailed information about their specific offer. They will also have an **options evening** where young people and their parents and carers can find out more about each subject.

The key stage 4 curriculum

'Every state-funded school must offer a curriculum which is balanced and broadly based, and which; promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society, and prepares pupils at the school for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life'. (The National Curriculum in England: key stage 3 and 4 framework document, December 2014)

In addition, all local authority maintained schools in England, are legally required to follow the statutory national curriculum, which sets out the subjects that should be taught to all pupils.

Compulsory subjects

At key stage 4, **English, maths and science** are 'core' national curriculum subjects that all students must study – most young people will take GCSEs in these. 'Science' can be taken as separate GCSEs – such as biology, chemistry and physics or as a double GCSE in combined science.

Other compulsory subjects are called 'foundation' subjects and include computing, physical education and citizenship. Schools must also provide religious education, relationships and health education, and sex education.



Optional subjects

These are subjects that young people can choose to take alongside compulsory subjects. Every school will offer a different range of subjects and qualifications – it is important to check each school's options booklet.

Schools must offer at least one subject from each of these areas:

- arts (such as dance, music, art and design and drama)
- design and technology
- humanities (such as history and geography)
- modern foreign languages.

Qualifications at key stage 4

As well as choosing which subjects to study at key stage 4, young people may also be able to choose the type of qualifications they want to study, depending on what is offered by their school.

They can choose between GCSEs and vocational qualifications – or a mixture of both.

Most students at key stage 4 study qualifications at entry level, level 1 or level 2. Level 2 is GCSE level. Schools and careers advisers will help young people choose qualifications at the right level for them. **MyDirections** also provides information about different types of qualifications, as well as advice for young people to help them decide which qualifications might be right for them.

GCSEs

The majority of students will take some GCSEs. GCSEs are:

- offered in over 40 subjects, although most schools will only offer a selection. Examples of GCSE subjects include English, maths, French, history, geography, chemistry, computer science and biology
- assessed by exams at the end of two or three years of study
- graded from 9-1 (old grades A*-G).

To give young people the most options after Year 11, they should aim to achieve grades 9-4 (equivalent of old grades A*-C). To study some subjects after Year 11, such as maths and science subjects, GCSEs at grades 9-6 will be required.

Vocational qualifications

Vocational qualifications are related to an area of work, such as health and social care or engineering. The range of subjects available as vocational qualifications is under review, and more subjects are likely to be available as vocational qualifications in the future. Most schools will only offer a selection of subjects, so it is important to check each school's options booklet.

Vocational qualifications are:

- available at entry level, level 1 and level 2 (GCSE level)
- offered by different awarding bodies, such as BTEC and City & Guilds – there are others
- often referred to as 'technical awards'. Technical awards are the equivalent of GCSEs and are studied alongside GCSEs
- more practical than GCSEs and the majority of assessment is through coursework, although they do also include some exams.

Choosing subjects and qualifications for key stage 4

When thinking about choosing subjects and qualifications that are right for them, young people should consider:

- **The options available to them at their own school.** In most schools, young people are allocated to a 'pathway'. Often, this is a colour or a letter. The pathway they are on will affect which subjects and qualifications they can take.
- **Which subjects they are good at and enjoy.** It is likely that young people will achieve higher grades in subjects they enjoy studying. Achieving higher grades, will mean more options are available after Year 11.
- **Their career ideas.** Specific subjects at GCSE level are required for some careers. Look at <https://nationalcareers.service.gov.uk/explore-careers> for information about different careers, including subjects required, or talk to the careers adviser in school. Young people who are uncertain about their career ideas, could try doing a career matching quiz such as Jed, Kudos, or Start, which many schools subscribe to. They could also try doing the Buzz quiz at www.westyorks-ca.gov.uk/skills/for-young-people/preparing-for-the-world-of-work/personality-and-skills-quiz – which is free and encourages young people to think about how personality types link to different careers.
- **How they learn best.** Vocational qualifications, such as BTECs, are usually more practical and are assessed through coursework, projects and tests. GCSEs are mainly assessed by exams.
- **How choosing or dropping a subject will affect the courses they can choose in the future.** Some subjects, such as languages and the sciences, build on prior learning and cannot be studied at a higher level without studying them at GCSE.

How parents and carers can help

Parents and carers can help young people with the decisions they have to make about their options, by attending parents and options evenings and talking through all the options. Evidence shows that young people value what their parents or carers think – so you have an important role in helping them to choose what is right for them.

Young should be encouraged to:

- **Ask for help** – this can be from their teachers and their careers adviser.
- **Work hard** – it is important to gain good grades, especially in English and maths. They also need a good record of attendance and behaviour at school, as employers, training providers, sixth forms and colleges will ask them for a reference.
- **Think for themselves** – they should choose subjects and qualifications based on what interests, motivates and suits them. They should not choose subjects to stay with their friends or because they think people they are 'girls' or 'boys' subjects.
- **Develop their skills and qualities** – they could ask their school about extracurricular activities that provide opportunities to develop different skills and qualities and also think about how they use their spare time to learn new things.
- **Find out** – they should get as much information as they can about the qualifications and subjects offered by their school. Have they done their research and the careers activities on **MyDirections**? Do their choices fit in with any courses or careers they may want to do at 16+?

Atypical admissions

Most young people will stay at their current school for key stage 4. However, there are other options:

- Some further education colleges offer full-time courses for students in key stage 4.

- University Technical Colleges (UTCs) are schools with a special focus on STEM subjects, for 14-19 year olds. Students combine studying traditional GCSEs and A levels with specialist technical qualifications – see <https://bakerdearing.org/supporting-utcs/find-a-utc> for more information.
- Studio schools are small schools teaching mainstream qualifications through project-based learning, and have employer involvement in the curriculum. They focus on developing skills through personal coaching and work experience.

Options 16+

After Year 11, young people must stay in learning until they are 18. This requirement is known as 'Raising the Participation Age' or RPA. Staying in learning does not mean that they have to stay at school. Instead, they could study full-time at college or with a training provider, get an apprenticeship, or start full-time work, voluntary work or self-employment (with part-time education or training).

At 16, they can choose to study a range of subjects and qualifications, at different levels. The decision about which qualifications to take, and at what level, will depend on the results they get at key stage 4. For example, to study level 3 qualifications (such as V levels, A levels or a T level), at least five GCSEs at grades 9-4 are usually required.

Currently, young people have to continue to study English and/or maths if they do not get a grade 9-4 in the subject at GCSE.

For more detailed information about post-16 options, see **MyDirections** or <https://nationalcareers.service.gov.uk/careers-advice/career-choices-at-16>

Options 18+

Young people aged 18+ have the same options as they have after Year 11. However, they no longer have to stay in learning. In addition, if they have qualifications at level 3, they could also consider higher education at a university or college. See **My Directions** or <https://nationalcareers.service.gov.uk/careers-advice/career-choices-at-18> for more information about post-18 options.

Developing key skills and qualities

In key stage 4, young people should start to think about how they can develop the key skills and qualities that employers say are important, such as communication skills, reliability, resilience, teamwork, time management and a willingness to learn.

For example, young people could help to organise events at school or get involved in other extracurricular activities. They could take part in programmes, such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award www.dofe.org or consider getting work experience, a part-time job or doing voluntary work.

Some schools offer students the opportunity to undertake work experience in Year 10 or Year 11. If not, young people could find their own work experience during the school holidays, for example. As well as developing some of the skills and qualities employers are looking for, work experience could help them find out if their chosen career area is right for them.