

A brief guide to current qualifications



There are many different qualifications available offered by schools, colleges, training providers and universities. This can be really confusing, but the differences are designed to enable everyone to achieve qualifications at different levels whatever their preferred style of learning. Qualifications can now be achieved through practical projects, course work, written exams and work based learning.

GCSEs

These are “traditional” qualifications offered by all schools in a wide range of subjects. They are assessed by a mix of coursework and written exams. Before the end of the 1980s, this level of qualification would have been known as ‘O’ Levels.

A and AS levels

These are one or two year programmes where year one leads to completion of AS (half an A level) and year two leads to A2 (full A level). Young people would usually choose three or four subjects and their study tends to be theoretical and mainly exam based or with a mix of exams and coursework.

BTEC

These are “vocational” qualifications designed to offer a more practical way of studying subjects related to broad areas of work. They are available in a range of subjects from Art and Design to Health and Social Care. These Diplomas are assessed through modules of coursework completed over one or two years.

Diplomas

The new Diplomas are a combination of theoretical and practical study related to an area of employment. They are offered at schools and colleges from Year 9 in eleven subject areas and have been designed in consultation with employers.

National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs)

These are vocational qualifications achieved through study of practical work based tasks. Assessment can be through observation of work activities and/or completion of a portfolio of evidence of skills at work.

Apprenticeships

An Apprentice will work towards a number of qualifications. This will include an NVQ (as described above) and a Technical Certificate that provides the underpinning knowledge of the sector they are working in. This will often be a BTEC or City & Guilds qualification. In addition an Apprentice will complete key skills certificates in literacy, numeracy, ICT, communication and working with others. Apprenticeships lead to Level 2 and Advanced Apprenticeships to Level 3 qualifications. All apprentices are in paid employment and most of the training takes place in the workplace. The rest usually takes place at a local college or a specialist training organisation, often on a day-release or block-release basis.

How do qualifications compare?

The table below of the National Qualifications Framework shows how each of these qualifications compares with others at different levels.

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Levels 4 to 8
Provides basic knowledge and skills eg number and word for use in every-day life and/or able to apply learning or perform job role with supervision – includes: GCSEs grades D to G BTEC Introductory Diploma – Foundation	Provides a broader understanding of a subject and/ or ability to perform tasks or job with some supervision – includes: GCSE grades A* - C BTEC First Diplomas and Certificates Diploma – Higher NVQ Level 2 Apprenticeship	Provides more in depth knowledge – appropriate for entry to university or working as a supervisor – includes: A level / AS level BTEC National Award, Certificate & Diplomas NVQ Level 3 Advanced Apprenticeship	High level specialist study appropriate for individuals moving into management, training or professions Foundation Degree Degree Higher National Diploma NVQ levels 4 & 5

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