

An Introduction to Qualifications

In the media and elsewhere, specific qualifications are often referred to without saying what they signify. This article will try to remedy that, and a good place to start is by distinguishing academic qualifications from vocational ones.

a) Academic.

Academic qualifications usually relate to subjects studied primarily to obtain knowledge and understanding rather than job-related skills. In ascending order, they are as follows,

GCSEs.

These are exams taken in individual subjects at the end of Year 11 (Key Stage 4). They include English, maths, and science (all compulsory), and several additional choices selected from option groups. GCSEs are undertaken by all students even those who don't intend to study for further qualifications; for those who do continue their education, particular subjects or grades in these exams are often required for progression.

A and AS-Levels.

These are (respectively) one and two-year courses immediately following GCSEs, and taken in sixth form or at college. Entry usually requires good grades (A-C; 5-9) in at least five subjects, including English and maths. Most institutions offer between 20 and 30 subjects, from which a student typically picks from two to four. Careful choice is important, especially if he/she has a specific career in mind.

Degrees.

Most first (or undergraduate) degree courses are studied full-time at university, and last three or four years. They are viewed as essentially academic even when (in, for example, medicine, engineering, or marine biology) they constitute preparation for a specific profession. Subjects with no direct occupational content (such as English literature, philosophy, or history) are still vocationally useful, though, as the graduate status to which they lead confers eligibility for many good jobs. Most graduates earn the title Bachelor of Arts (BA) or Bachelor of Science (BSc), with variations such as LLB (for those with law degrees) or BEng (for engineering subjects).

Higher Degrees.

Higher degrees can sometimes be studied part-time, but the majority are taken full-time, and last from one to three years. Only graduates who have performed well in their first degree are likely to be considered, and competition for most places is strong. Higher degrees often prove a route to especially challenging, satisfying, and well-paid work, though none of these is guaranteed. They come at two levels - masters and doctoral. The first leads to qualifications like MA (Master of Arts) or MSc (Master of Science), the second to a doctorate (PhD/DPhil).

b) Vocational.

'Vocational' relates to qualifications pertaining to work, and to acquiring skills rather than (just) knowledge. Introduced initially as National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), these are now usually referred-to simply as 'levels'. Most have a precise academic value (or equivalent) not only to students and trainees, but to academic institutions and employers, too. There are 8 levels in all, the first 6 being those most relevant to young people.

Level 1.

Few (or even no) GCSEs are normally needed to start the 1-year college course to which this leads.

Level 2.

Four GCSEs at grades 3-1 are typically required for entry. This, too, usually entails a 1-year college course. It is also awarded for completing an Intermediate Apprenticeship.

Level 3.

Completion of Level 2 or 5 GCSEs at grades 9-4 are normally required to begin. It entails 2 years of study at college or sixth form, and the qualification gained is called an Advanced Diploma. This is also the Level awarded for completing an Advanced Apprenticeship.

Level 4.

Entry requirements may vary, but this is the level awarded for completing a Higher Apprenticeship, or Higher National Certificate.

Level 5.

This is awarded for completing a Foundation Degree, Higher National Diploma (HND), or Diploma in Higher Education (Dip HE).

Level 6.

This is reached by gaining a first (undergraduate) degree, or a Degree Apprenticeship.

Level 7.

Master's Degree (usually MA, MSc, MEng, or MBA).

Level 8.

Doctoral Degree (Phd or DPhil).

Scottish Qualifications.

Significant changes in 2013-16 gave schools in Scotland much more freedom than those in England, Wales or Northern Ireland to decide what they teach. Despite this, the large majority of Scottish students take National exams at age 15, Highers (if they wish) two years later: these are necessary for university entry. Advanced Highers provide the option of starting university in the second year of a degree.

International Baccalaureate.

The diploma awarded through this two-year programme for 16-19-year-olds is well-respected by universities world-wide. It consists of three core elements and six subjects which cover languages, sciences, maths and computing, the arts, and social sciences, thereby offering a broader base than A-levels. More information is available [here](#)

There other qualifications based on the same principle as the IB: for instance, a Welsh Baccalaureate can be studied at some schools and colleges in Wales. More information [here](#)

European Baccalaureate

The European Baccalaureate cycle comprises the two last years of secondary education, and consists of a comprehensive multilingual curriculum. Pupils must always follow a combination of language, humanities and scientific subjects with subjects taught through more than one language. More information including the schools implementing the EB is available [here](#).

Foreign Qualifications.

If your son/daughter holds qualifications gained abroad, and you're unsure of their value within the British education system, there is an organisation through which you can establish this. It is called UK NARIC, and details are to be found at <https://www.naric.org.uk/naric/>