

Options Choices – Key Points

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GCSE Choices

- Everyone takes core subjects, which automatically helps to keep options open.
- They may be able to choose from other types of qualifications. These are equivalent to GCSEs and can be great options.
- All grades count, but maths, English, and science are particularly important, and maths and English will need to be retaken if they do not achieve at least a grade 4.
- **Creative subjects** develop a wide range of skills and make it much easier to continue with a related subject at college. Sometimes, experiences outside school or a portfolio/audition may be considered instead of a related GCSE when applying to college.
- **Languages** are increasingly important and a good subject to take to widen future options. Even if their preferred language is not available, studying any language will make it easier for them to pick up a new one later on, and there are many opportunities to do this. To continue with a language at college, they will usually need at least a grade 6 in it at GCSE. But if they don't get on well with languages, another course choice may be better for their grades and happiness.
- **Sciences** are very important and reasonable pass grades at GCSE are expected for many future options. Both double and triple science will keep choices open for science-based careers, so consider which is more likely to lead to good grades. To continue with "pure" sciences at college, a student would typically need at least a grade 6 in two GCSE sciences.
- Research options in detail and make sure it is the right one for your child. They are the ones studying it for the next few years. Consider the workload, how it is taught and assessed, and how it fits with other subjects they are considering.

POST 16 and 18 Choices

College

- **6th Form Colleges:** Offering a range of different subjects, including A levels, BTECs, and other level 3 qualifications, and potentially courses at level 2 and below. Students can choose to mix up to 3 subjects and use this to prepare for a specific goal or to keep options open. Courses are more likely to be theory-based and include exams, but there are also applied subjects. They can lead to work, university, or apprenticeships.
- **Vocational/Career-Focused Colleges:** Offering work-related qualifications in many areas. Students choose one course, which prepares them for an industry or a specific job. A good option if they like more applied learning and have at least a general idea of what they want to do in the future. Many of these courses can lead to university, and they are an excellent stepping stone or backup to apprenticeships. Courses are available at different levels depending on GCSE results.

Apprenticeships

- A real job, combining work and training, which allows people to work while gaining recognised qualifications, in some areas up to degree and masters degree level.
- A great way to start a career if they are keen to start work and are sure about the area they want to work in. On average, 4 days/week are spent at work and 1 day in training. Both work and training are paid (minimum £8/h from April 2026).
- Apprenticeships last at least one year, can be started after GCSEs or later on, are available in most industries, and can be a great alternative to college or university.

University

- A huge range of subjects and types of courses are available – currently over 30000 in the UK.
- Entry requirements can vary widely! (But the higher the grades, the more choice.)
- Most degrees accept a wide range of qualifications and subjects, not just traditional A-levels.
- The UK has over 300 universities and other HE providers, and courses can range from highly practical courses, preparing for a specific profession, to more traditional academic courses.
- Students can study a traditional three-year degree, but there are also options for shorter courses, part-time or accelerated courses, degree apprenticeships, and studying abroad (both for the full degree or as part of a UK degree).

Gap Year(s)

- A great way of doing something they always wanted to try, gaining general life experience or specific experience to help get that chosen apprenticeship or degree.
- Gap years are well-liked by universities and employers and can include really anything, from working your way around the world, volunteering, or “just travelling”, to short courses, work experience or structured gap year schemes at high-profile companies.

Tips for you

- **Support** them, but don't make the choices for them. It is important to gain experience for the more challenging choices they will need to make later on.
- Do some **research** for yourself so you have an overview of the options and challenges your child has. It makes it a bit easier to have conversations when the opportunity arises and can help you feel a bit calmer.
- **Encourage** them to try different activities, volunteering and work experience and then help them to reflect on what they did and didn't enjoy and why.
- **Talk!** Ask questions and show interest in their views. Pay attention to how you talk about your own career and what impression that may make on your child.

Resources:

- www.careerpilot.org.uk/job-sectors
- <https://icould.com/article/choosing-your-gcse-options>
- www.apprenticeships.gov.uk/
- www.ucas.com the official university application service, includes lots of great guides and a degree search, as well as great information on alternatives to university
- Watch the video to The 100-year life [here](#) – animation from the London Business School

If you would like more information, inspiration, and tips for you and your child, come and join my free Facebook group for parents here www.facebook.com/groups/CheerfulCareersGroup.

And if you would like a simple step-by-step guide to help your child make informed GCSE choices, you can download a free GCSE Choices Checklist here: www.cheerfulcareers.com/resources/#freebies