



24 leading universities
working together with
schools and colleges

How do I help my students...
make the right choices for post-16 study?



Get started >

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This resource will help you guide your students in making their study decisions.

It covers information on qualifications including GCSEs, A-levels, Scottish Highers and vocational courses. It also provides advice on how to support students who are applying to highly competitive courses.




This information sits alongside **Informed Choices** , the Russell Group's guide to making decisions about post-16 education.

The section **How important is level 2?**  focuses on pre-16 qualifications and what leading universities are looking for. The sections **Which A-levels or Highers should my students choose?**  and **Other qualifications**  outline the various level 3 qualifications that facilitate study at a leading university.

The following symbols will help you find your way around this resource:

-  provides a link to more information in this guidebook
-  takes you to another website with more detailed information.

Keep an eye out for:

-  provides key questions to ask your students
-  highlights key information
-  tells you how to find out more.

We wish you and your students every success!

Section 1

How important is level 2?



How important is level 2?

Level 2 qualifications are an important factor on a student's path to a leading university.

The decisions your students make at age 13 about their level 2 study (for example, the GCSEs they choose) will affect the options available should they decide to go on to higher education. However, at this stage, students may not have a firm idea of whether they want to go to university or what they want to study. This section offers advice on how to support your students with these early decisions and provides information on what these decisions could mean for their post-16 choices.

Our main piece of advice is to encourage your students to think about what really interests them. Are they interested in the sciences, arts, humanities, languages, or a combination of these? Which particular aspects of these subjects interest them most?

We suggest that they:


- study the subjects that will enable them to take the appropriate A-levels, Highers/Advanced Highers or vocational qualifications at level 3. Some may be clear: for example GCSE French will be needed to study A-level French. But, others may not be so obvious. If students are unsure, encourage them to speak to their post-16 providers
- choose optional subjects that they are good at and that interest them
- keep their options open by studying triple science, if they are interested in science and have the aptitude
- take a wide range of subjects at GCSE, including a foreign language, to give them a breadth of learning.



How may GCSEs be used in admissions processes?

The use of GCSE and Standard Grade (Scottish) qualifications in admissions processes varies. As a minimum requirement, most leading universities expect applicants to hold level 2 qualifications at grade C or above in English language and mathematics. But different courses within each university will have their own requirements that will be set out as part of the entry criteria. Examples could include:

- GCSE at grade B in mathematics may be required for a degree in psychology
- GCSE grade B in maths or physics may be required to study veterinary medicine
- GCSE grade B in English may be required to undertake teacher training.

For more information, refer to individual course webpages or refer to the Russell Group's guide, [Informed Choices](#) .

GCSE and Standard Grade qualifications are often used to gain an understanding of a student's academic profile and whether they will be able to succeed on their chosen course. They may also be a good performance indicator. However, leading universities recognise that there can be significant improvements in performance as a student moves into post-16 study. If this is the case, ensure that you talk about this improvement in the academic reference on the UCAS form. This is particularly important if there is a significant gap between achievement at key stage 4 and the predicted grades stated in their application.

The recent A-level reforms mean that many students will not take AS-levels. This means that some leading universities may take GCSE grades into account more than in previous years when making their admissions decisions. Make sure your students know that their GCSEs are important.



Key points to remember

1. Universities often have minimum entry requirements for mathematics and English at level 2.
2. Many employers have minimum qualification standards for mathematics and English at level 2.
2. Some university courses require a number of GCSEs or Standard Grades to be taken in one sitting. This demonstrates a student's ability to learn and comprehend a significant amount of material.
3. Some universities may require particular GCSE subjects and grades (or equivalent) for highly competitive degree programmes. Encourage your students to check individual course pages on university websites.
4. Some university courses do not accept resits.
5. Universities do not reward students for sitting examinations early.
6. The choices your students make for their level 2 study could affect the options available to them for level 3 and university study. Encourage them to check the subjects required to study the level 3 qualifications that interest them.
7. When choosing level 2 subjects students should focus on their interests.
8. Students should consider taking a wide range of subjects at level 2 to give them a breadth of learning and keep their options open.



Section 2

Which A-levels or Highers
should my students choose?



Which A-levels or Highers should my students choose?

Most leading universities make offers based on three grades at A-level or in Highers or Advanced Highers.

Some degree courses will require minimum grades in particular subjects, whilst other courses will accept a range of subjects for entry. If a student is taking Scottish qualifications, entry requirements will probably be expressed in terms of Highers but may also include Advanced Highers.

Offers will often be outlined in one of the following ways:


- as a list of grades with no subject requirements; for example, ABB
- as a list of grades which should be gained in certain subjects; for example, ABB including chemistry, physics and mathematics
- as a list of grades which must be achieved in the corresponding subjects; for example, A in chemistry, B in physics and B in mathematics
- as a combination of requirements, with a specific subject listed alongside other subjects that would be acceptable; for example, A in chemistry plus at least two B grades from physics, mathematics and biology.



Which subjects for which course?

For many courses at leading universities students will require A-levels, Highers or Advanced Highers in particular subjects.

Universities will ask for specific grades and subjects in order to identify the students with the most talent, potential and ability to succeed. They may ask for specific subjects where a certain foundation of knowledge is required to succeed on the course. It is important that students check all the requirements early on in their decision-making process.

If your students have an idea about what they might want to study, they should look at entry requirements at a range of universities before making a decision on the subjects and qualifications they take post-16. **Informed Choices**  is a useful resource to support this process.

When choosing to study a subject at a higher level, encourage your students to consider subjects they:

- have enjoyed and have been good at in the past
- need to enter a particular career or course
- have not studied before but have looked into and think will suit their strengths.

You may also find our **decision-making process**  in strand one useful.



Informed Choices

published by the Russell Group will help your students think about which courses and subjects to study post-16.

Keeping their options open

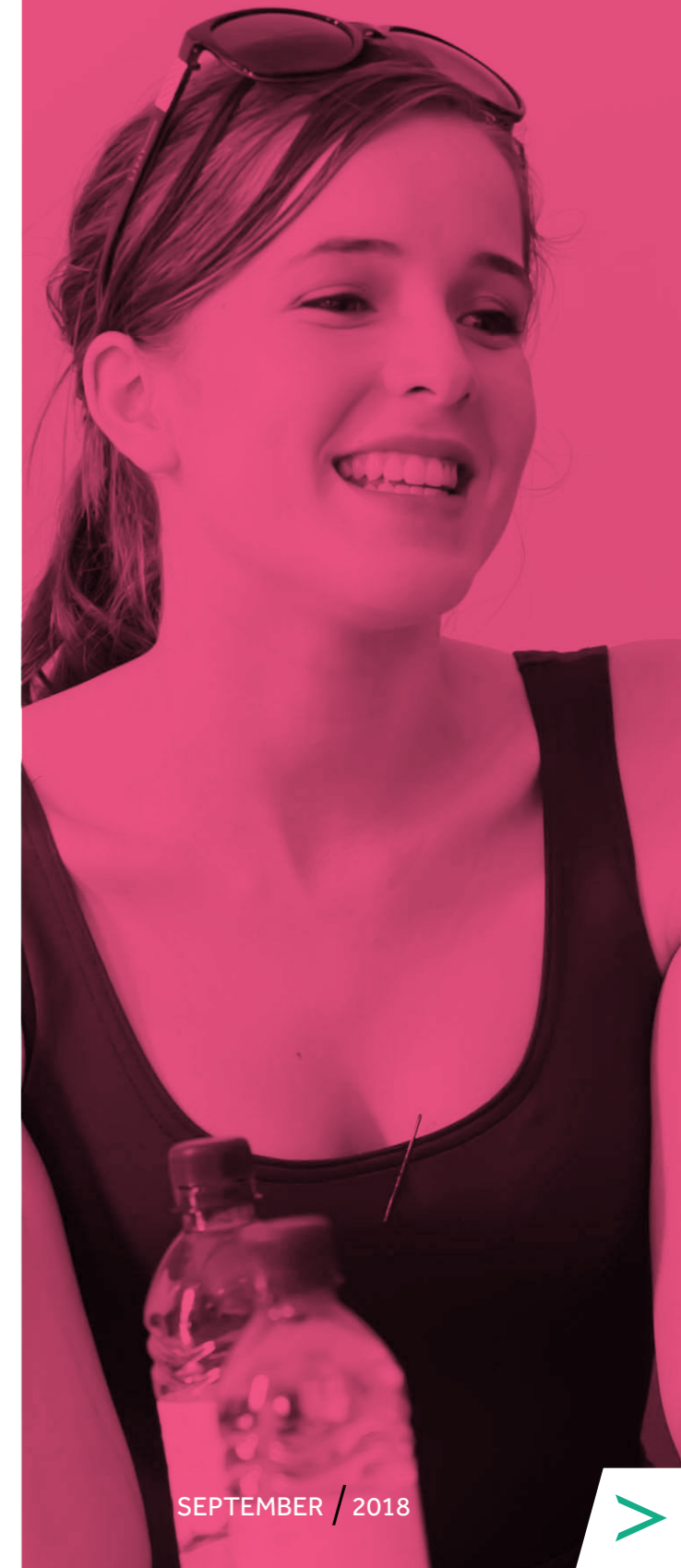
Your students may want to go to university but may not be sure what they want to study.

They can keep their options open by choosing a mix of level 3 subjects that are most commonly required by leading universities – these are sometimes referred to as 'facilitating subjects'. If students do not know which degree they want to study then taking two facilitating subjects will keep a wide range of courses open to them. Admissions staff from Russell Group universities have developed the following list of facilitating subjects:

- biology
- chemistry
- English literature
- geography
- history
- mathematics and further mathematics
- modern and classical languages
- physics

For more information on facilitating subjects, see [Informed Choices](#) .

When your students are considering which facilitating subjects to take, as with any other subject, they should choose according to their individual strengths and interests.



Are there subjects that leading universities do not accept?

Critical thinking, citizenship studies and general studies are usually better taken as 'extras' at A-level, rather than as main subjects. Also, some universities have a list of 'non-preferred subjects', or subjects that are only suitable if taken in combination with others. Encourage your students to research the universities and courses they may be interested in.

A-levels or Highers taken in one sitting

Many leading universities will expect applicants to have taken the required A-levels or Highers in one sitting, that is, concurrently. This helps ensure that students can cope with the workload required at university.

If a student has not been able to do this – for example, if they have followed an accelerated curriculum – include an explanation in your academic reference so it can be given individual consideration by admissions staff.

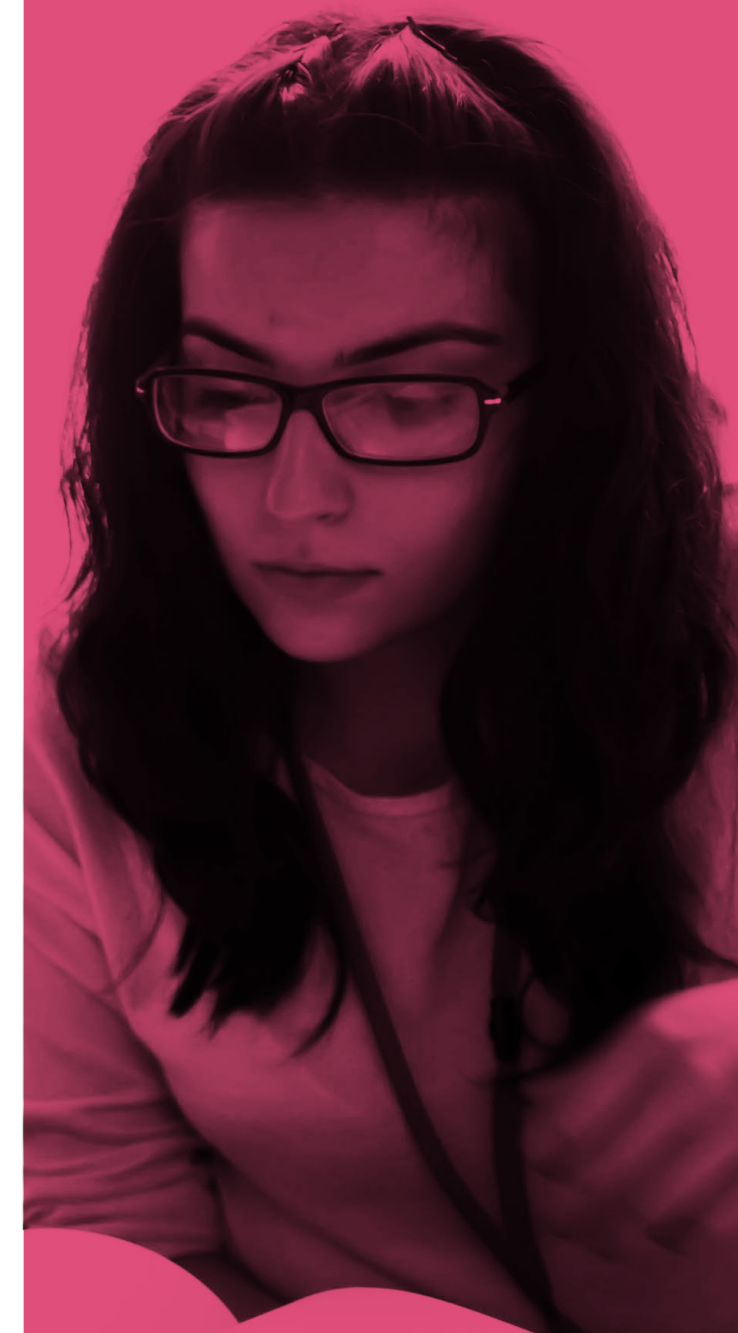
Resits

If a student feels they need to resit their A-levels or Highers, they need to find out whether resits will be accepted by the relevant course and university.

Before they embark on a further year of study, ensure they research a range of universities so they can make an informed decision.

If a student needs to resit an examination owing to extenuating circumstances, they should contact admissions staff to talk about their specific situation and how this may be taken into account when they apply.

Some universities only consider extenuating circumstances highlighted at the point of application, so we encourage you to contact the relevant admissions team as soon as you are aware of the issue. Include all relevant information in your reference as part of the student's application.



Section 3

Other qualifications



Here we discuss some of the other qualifications your students may wish to study. This is not an exhaustive list and for more information refer to **Informed Choices** .

International Baccalaureate

All leading universities accept the International Baccalaureate.

The choice of higher-level subjects in the International Baccalaureate (IB) is key to determining the university courses your student can apply for. Universities will often specify which higher-level subjects and grades are required for entry.

Encourage your students to check university websites and the relevant course pages for information on entry requirements.

Informed Choices  also has more information.

Advanced Welsh Baccalaureate

Many leading universities also accept the Advanced Welsh Baccalaureate.

They usually accept this alongside two A-levels. However, university policies will differ, so your students should check individual university websites for further detail.


Informed Choices  also has more information.



Cambridge Pre-U

Most leading universities consider applicants studying the Cambridge Pre-U.

Universities are familiar with the Pre-U qualification and consider applicants with the Pre-U Diploma or one or more Principal Subjects in combination with A-levels. Universities will usually request at least three Principal Subjects and/or A-levels. Students should not choose the same subjects for both Pre-U and A-level. A student's choice of Principal Subjects will determine which university courses are open to them. Not all universities will necessarily include the Global Perspectives and Research component of the Diploma in offers.

Check individual university websites for more information. **Informed Choices**  also provides further information including an indication of the Principal Subjects required for progression to particular degree courses.

AS-levels

AS-level grades are not normally included in offers from leading universities.


Generally speaking, leading universities make offers based on three A-levels (or equivalent). However, AS-level grades, where they exist, are often taken as an indication of A-level performance in conjunction with predicted grades. Some universities also see particular educational value in students taking AS-levels and some require a fourth AS-level for certain courses (for example, some medicine degrees). Please therefore ensure your students check entry requirements and guidance on university websites.




Leading universities are used to assessing applications from a variety of contexts and understand that schools and colleges differ in how they deliver the curriculum. They recognise that many applicants will not have AS-levels and are committed to treating all applicants fairly. Admissions policies are designed to ensure that no student is disadvantaged.

Decisions are always based on a wide range of factors, including GCSE (or equivalent) attainment, predicted grades, the strength of the personal statement and evidence of achievement and potential provided in the academic reference.

In the reference, we encourage you to include information which contextualises the student's academic performance and gives further detail relating to their predicted grades (particularly, if there has been a significant change in academic performance since GCSE).

 If you do not offer AS-levels at your school or college, or offer a non-standard curriculum, highlight this in the reference.

Certifying AS-levels

Each school and college will have their own policy on certifying AS-levels. If a student's AS-levels have been certificated before they apply through UCAS, they will need to include them as completed qualifications on the form. If AS-levels are not certified at the time of application, they are listed as 'pending'. If your school or college does not certify AS-levels, they do not need to be included on the form. More information on the certification of AS-levels is available through [UCAS](#) .



To find out more about how Russell Group universities view the AS-level visit the [Russell Group website](#) .



Extended Project Qualification

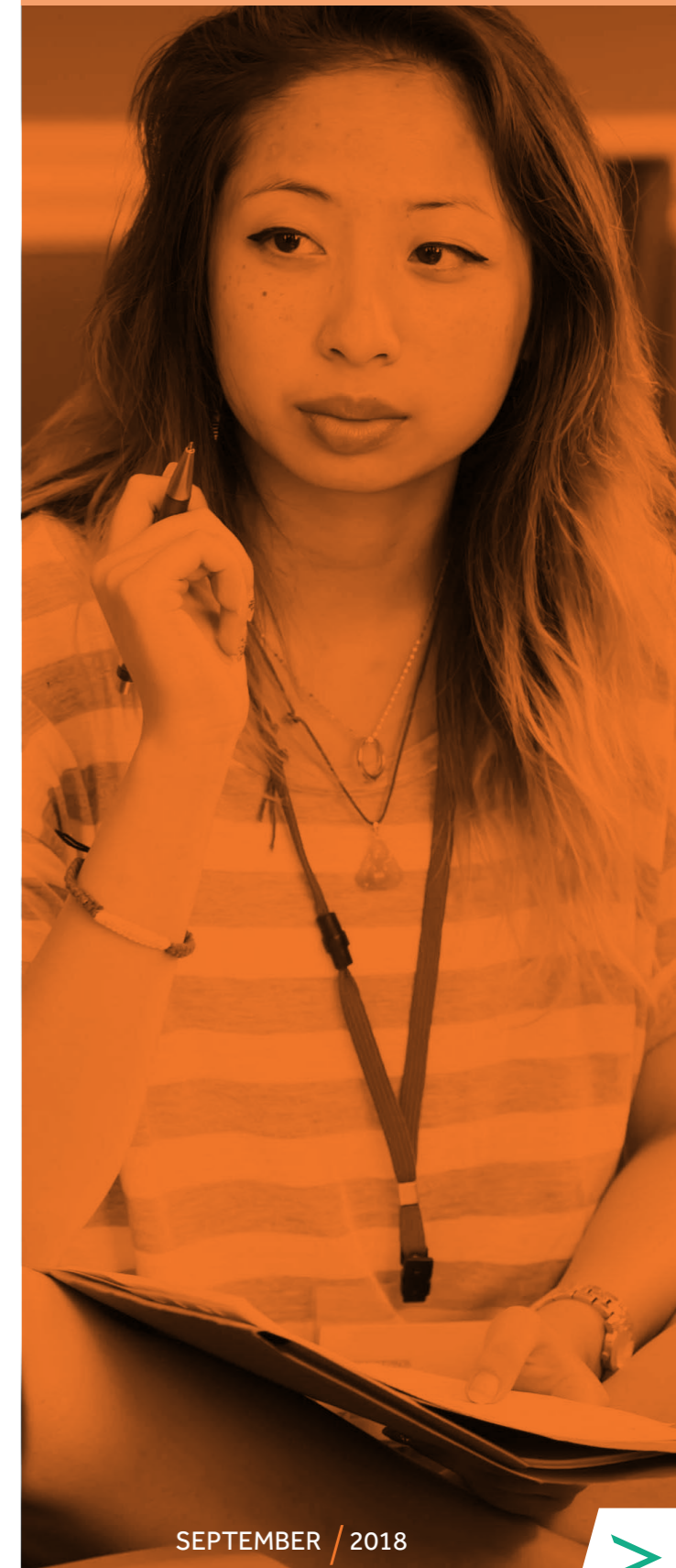
Many leading universities consider the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) to be good preparation for higher education study.

It provides evidence of a student's ability to plan an extended piece of work and demonstrates research and independent learning skills. In developing these essential study skills, it helps the student to make the transition from school to university.

The EPQ may not always be part of the offer. However, it will often be taken into account when considering a student's aptitude for study.

The EPQ, and the skills it has given them, should be included in the student's personal statement. They can talk about it in their application and at interview to demonstrate their interest in and aptitude for their chosen degree course. If the project topic is not obviously linked to the degree, encourage them to explain how the skills developed in the EPQ are relevant.

Encourage your students to check individual university websites for information on how they view the EPQ.



Core maths

'Core maths' refers to a group of mathematics qualifications available in England.

These are designed for students who have achieved at least a grade 4 in mathematics GCSE and wish to continue studying mathematics in some way but are not taking it at AS- or A-level.

Leading universities value mathematics skills for many different degree courses and most have GCSE or equivalent requirements. Mathematical and statistical problem-solving, data-analysis and interpretation skills are useful for a wide variety of undergraduate degrees. A core maths qualification may help your students improve and maintain these skills, especially if they are not taking AS- or A-level mathematics or further mathematics.

Some universities may consider core maths if a student has not met the minimum GCSE mathematics requirement. Encourage your students to check individual university websites for more information.

Many degree courses require AS- or A-level mathematics and sometimes further mathematics as part of their entry requirements. Where this is the case, a core maths qualification is not a suitable substitute.

See the [Core Maths Support Programme website](#)  for more information.



Vocational qualifications


Many leading universities welcome applicants studying vocational qualifications, including BTEC level 3, for some of their courses.

Vocational qualifications like the BTEC, CACHE Level 3 Diplomas and the Cambridge Technicals can be a good route to relevant degree programmes. However, they may not be appropriate for students applying for courses that are not immediately relevant to those qualifications and some universities do not accept vocational qualifications for any of their courses.

Vocational qualifications are often targeted towards certain career pathways and develop particular skill sets and knowledge that will not be relevant to some degree programmes. Students considering vocational qualifications as a post-16 pathway should reflect on their skills, strengths, interests and whether their choices could limit what they might want to do in the future.

Where vocational qualifications are accepted, universities may ask that they are studied alongside other qualifications, such as certain subjects at A-level. For example, if a student wishes to take a science, technology, engineering or mathematics course at university, they may require A-level mathematics in addition to their vocational qualifications. This ensures that they can succeed in the mathematical elements of the programme.



 Most vocational qualifications are modular, and often university courses will specify the modules that must be taken and the grades to be achieved. Students should check entry criteria with the universities they are interested in and whether their school or college offers the required modules.

Assessment of level 3 vocational programmes often involves fewer examinations than A-level or Highers. Encourage students considering vocational qualifications to investigate how their proposed university course will be assessed. Those who have not have taken formal examinations as part of their level 3 study can find the adjustment to examination-based programmes challenging at first.

Information about vocational qualifications is not always given in the university prospectus but should be available online. Students should always contact admissions teams if they are at all unsure.




Access qualifications

Many leading universities welcome applicants studying an Access to HE Diploma for some courses.

Leading universities are keen to encourage mature learners onto their courses and often offer specific events at open days and drop-in advice sessions. University websites will have information about these events and activities.

However, not all programmes accept the Access to HE Diploma and students should check individual entry requirements. These will range from a pass in the Diploma to offers specifying a set number of units achieved at distinction and/or merit. If the offer is unclear, encourage students to contact the university for clarification.

 Courses usually specify the units that students must take and the grades that must be achieved. Students should check entry criteria with relevant universities and whether the required units are available at their place of study.

Often universities will ask for additional qualifications, such as level 2 English and mathematics qualifications or A-levels in particular subjects, alongside an Access to HE Diploma.

Some universities will refer applicants to a foundation course, which is an additional year of university study before starting the main degree. This enables students to access degree study with alternative qualifications.



Section 6
Further information



Further information

Bright knowledge

www.brightknowledge.org

Core maths

www.core-maths.org/about-core-maths/teachers

Informed Choices

Informed Choices provides students with information, advice and guidance about their post-16 subject choices.

www.russellgroup.ac.uk/for-students/school-and-college-in-the-uk/subject-choices-at-school-and-college

Ofqual postcards: GCSE, AS- and A-level reforms

www.gov.uk/government/publications/your-qualification-our-regulation-gcse-as-and-a-level-reforms

Prospects

www.prospects.ac.uk

Russell Group AS-level information

www.russellgroup.ac.uk/for-students/how-do-russell-group-universities-view-the-as-level

Total Professions

www.totalprofessions.com

UCAS

www.ucas.com

UCAS AS-level information

www.ucas.com/advisers/guides-and-resources/qualification-reform/applying-to-reformed-qualifications

Which? University

university.which.co.uk

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