

# A level myth buster

The truth about the educational  
and career choices that young people  
make at 16 and 18





3	4	5
400	600	520
57%	40%	33%

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A levels play a key role in shaping the career choices of many young people. Choices about qualifications are career choices, as are the decisions made when reacting to the outcome of an exam. Given this, it is important that young people have good information to underpin their decision-making.

This publication seeks to bust a few myths and reveal some surprising truths about what young people are doing between the ages of 16 and 18 and what they then go on to do afterwards.

In this summary of our full report, we work through some of the common myths about qualifications and careers and reveal what the truth is. We also pose some questions designed to help young people to think about their options. Our main report provides a lot more detail behind the facts that we present.

We hope that this will be a helpful resource for teachers, careers advisers and parents as they advise

young people deciding whether or not to choose A levels and what to do when they finish.

At The Careers & Enterprise Company, we passionately believe that learning can transform lives, and that everyone should do their best to achieve academically. However, whatever happens with results, A levels are just the beginning of a lifelong process of career building.

# 1 | Where do young people go at 16?

## Myth

These days everyone stays in school until they are 18.

## Fact

Less than half of young people stay on at school after the age of 16. Most go on to college, but a small number move into apprenticeships or directly into work.

## Myth

Everyone goes on to do A levels straight after GCSEs.

## Fact

While lots of young people are progressing onto A levels or equivalent qualifications (known as level 3 qualifications) at 16, around half of young people are studying for lower level qualifications.

## What are the options at 16?

It can often be easiest to stay in school or to go to the local sixth form college, but there are other options. More and more young people are studying at a further education college. The government is committed to continuing to improve the quality and status of vocational qualifications so these qualifications can also offer good opportunities. Alternatively, a minority of young people are going straight into work at the age of 16, with many pursuing apprenticeships. This is another important option that everyone should consider.

## Not ready to progress to A levels or another level 3 qualification?

Most young people move on to take a level 3 qualification at 16. If they haven't done very well in GCSEs however, they may be encouraged to take or retake a level 2 qualification either instead of or alongside A levels. Before doing this, they should ask about what options this qualification opens up to progress to level 3 in the future or job opportunities after they have completed the qualification.

**Myth**

The academic path is the only option.

**Fact**

A levels are only one type of qualification that can be worked towards. Of those young people who take a level 3 qualification, only about 3 in 5 are just taking A levels. The rest are either combining A levels with a vocational qualification or specialising in a vocational subject.

**A levels or something more vocational?**

It is possible to take just A levels, just vocational qualifications or to combine the two. All of these options can offer young people good opportunities and so it is important to look at them all, to think about where they lead and to consider which option is best for the individual.



# 2 | Choosing A levels

## Myth

A levels only offer a narrow set of subject choices.

## Fact

There are a wide range of options available at A level which should be able to appeal to diverse interests. However, most of the A levels taken are in one of the top six subjects (maths, biology, psychology, chemistry, history and English literature). Perhaps because of this, it is difficult to find all of the possible options in any one institution.

## Myth

Nobody is taking science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) A levels.

## Fact

Despite ongoing concerns about the need for more science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) skills, these subjects are very popular with students. Maths is the most popular A level subject and the proportion of young people taking STEM subjects is increasing. STEM subjects make up 3 of the top 5 and 4 of the top 10 subjects.

## Which A levels to study?

There are a wide number of options available to young people. These include many options that may not be available at a current school and new subjects that have not been studied at GCSE. It is important for young people to reflect on these choices carefully and think about why they are interested in the qualifications that they are pursuing. Young people may also need to shop around to find a school or college that offers the A levels that they are most interested in.

## Studying a STEM subject?

The evidence tells us that science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects lead to some very good career outcomes. But they aren't right for everyone. Young people should reflect on whether taking a STEM subject is the right decision for them and consider some of the possible career paths that might emerge from the A levels they choose.

**Myth**

Only boys take STEM subjects.

**Fact**

Boys are more likely to take STEM A levels than girls, but very large numbers of girls are taking these subjects. The gap between male and female participation in STEM is starting to narrow.

**Crossing the gender gap?**

Boys and girls are still more likely to take some subjects than others. But even the extreme examples like psychology, where there are three girls for every boy, or physics, where there are almost four boys for every girl, still have lots of people making decisions that run counter to this. Academic subjects have no gender and all genders and types of people have the potential to do well at all subjects. In many subjects, longstanding patterns are changing and will continue to change if young people follow their interests rather than going with the stereotypes.



# 3 | Looking at grades

## Myth

Everyone gets an A\* these days.

## Fact

Only about a quarter of people get an A\* or A in their A levels. Almost half get a C or below.

## Myth

Some subjects are much harder than others.

## Fact

Opinion is divided on this question. Some subjects definitely have more students getting A\* and A grades than others, but this may be about the kind of young people who choose those subjects.

## What grade to aim for?

While they are studying, it is useful for young people to have an idea of what grade they are aiming for. As they learn, they will build up a picture of performance and get feedback from teachers. Young people should aim for a grade that is stretching, but realistic.

## What grade did you get?

On results day, it can often be difficult to put individual grades into perspective, particularly if an individual didn't get into their destination of choice or is surrounded by people who did 'better'. It can be helpful for a young person to understand where they sit in the overall rankings. For example, if someone gets an A\* or A in psychology, they are one of the top 20% in that subject. But if they got the same grade in chemistry they are only one of the top 30%. Both are a great achievement, but they will open different doors. One of the most important things to remember is that most people are not getting A\* or A grades, but that everybody moves on to the next stage of their career.

## Retaking A Levels?

When someone doesn't get the grade they want or expect, one possibility is to retake exams next year. Before making this commitment, it's worth thinking about the following questions:

- Did they really do badly or did they just not do as well as their friends?
- Is a change of plan required or can the same path still be pursued, perhaps at a different university?
- What new and interesting opportunities are out there now that there's a chance to think again?
- And critically, if exams are retaken, what are the chances of doing better next time?



# 4 | Destinations after A level

## University

### Myth

Everyone goes to university these days.

### Fact

Although the number of people who stay in education past 18 has been increasing, only about half of young people are moving on from A levels or equivalent qualifications to go to university. About a quarter are going to work, with most of the rest pursuing a vocational qualification.

### Myth

University is all about theory and abstraction. You don't learn anything that you can use in the real world.

### Fact

There are a wide range of degree programmes. Many are very applied and lead directly into a career or group of careers. The generic skills that can be developed by all students are prized by employers even when they have done more theoretically based courses.

### Choosing to go to university.

University is a good option for lots of people, but there is also a danger that a young person may fall into it by default. University is just one option amongst many, and the growth of options like higher and degree apprenticeships also have a lot to recommend them. It is worth young people visiting some universities and thinking seriously about this, but also looking at the other options. Ultimately, it is useful to think a bit more long term about a career - this can help inform what the next step might be.

### What to study at university?

There are a wide range of subjects that can be studied at university. The most common groups of subjects are allied to medicine, biological sciences, business studies, creative arts and design and social studies. But these subjects only scratch the surface of what is on offer. This is why it is important to research potential university courses well before making a choice. A level subjects provide a good guide, but there are a lot of new things out there as well.

**Myth**

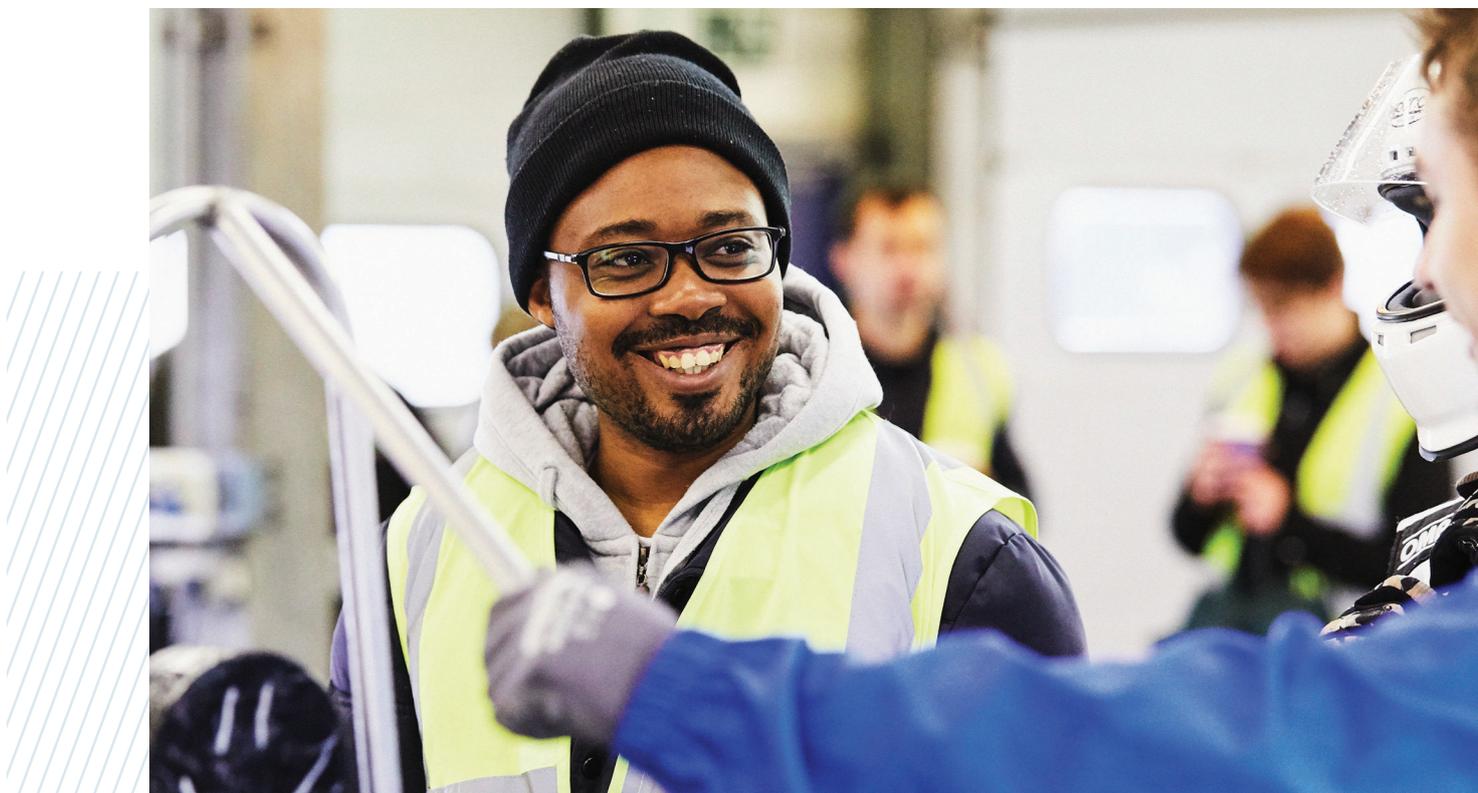
University isn't for people like me.

**Fact**

University is the most popular destination following A levels. People of all types and all backgrounds are successful on all courses and at all types of universities. However, there are clear patterns which mean that some more advantaged people are over-represented on some courses and at some universities. Lots of people including the government, universities and The Careers & Enterprise Company are campaigning to ensure that background becomes less and less important in the future.

**Fitting in at university?**

Universities are generally quite diverse places and young people can expect to meet a lot of people from different kinds of backgrounds. Indeed, learning to get along with people with different experiences and opinions is one of the opportunities that university offers. It is dangerous to make decisions on the basis of patterns of whether other young people come from more or less advantaged backgrounds as this is likely to exclude some great opportunities. It is much better to commit to following an interest, whilst challenging stereotypes.



## Future education

### Myth

If you haven't got good qualifications by the time you're 18, you'll never get them.

### Fact

There are lots of opportunities to retake A levels or to take new qualifications after someone turns 18. While it is important to do as well as possible between 16 and 18, this is not the only chance! Over 70% of learners in further education are over 18.

### Stopping learning after 18?

Progression in a career is strongly linked to an ability to keep on learning. Even if someone hasn't done very well at school, it is important not to close the door on learning. Lots of other people are pursuing qualifications in further education after the age of 18. Further education colleges offer a very different learning environment to schools and may better suit an individual.

## Apprenticeships

### Myth

Apprenticeships are just for traditional industrial jobs.

### Fact

Around 7% of young people progress to apprenticeships at 18 or 19. They are pursuing a wide range of programmes at different levels of skill (including some high level opportunities in ICT). The most popular types of apprenticeship are in business, administration, law, health, public services and care. The more traditional apprenticeship sector of engineering and manufacturing is the third most popular option, alongside retail and commercial apprenticeships.

### Doing an apprenticeship at 18?

In many ways, apprenticeships combine the best of both worlds. They allow a young person to work and start to earn money, whilst continuing to learn and develop their skills. If someone can find an apprenticeship in an employment area in which they are interested, it is worth investigating. However, apprenticeships are more difficult to find in some areas than others, so help and advice may need to be sought about the best way to get into some specific apprenticeship areas.

## Employment

### Myth

No young people go to work at 18.

### Fact

Around a quarter of young people finish their studies at 18 and move into work.

### Looking for a job?

After higher education, employment is the second most popular destination for young people at the age of 18. Around a quarter of young people finish their studies at 19 and move into work. This figure has not changed significantly in recent years.

However, where you live has a big influence on your likelihood of moving straight to work when you are 18. In the South West they are reporting 29% of students entering employment at the end of Key Stage 5, while in London this destination is only reported by 15%.

## NEET

### Myth

Loads of young people are sitting around doing nothing.

### Fact

Less than 10% of young people aren't in education, employment or training (NEET) six months after they finish key stage 5. This number has been dropping over recent years. Of those who are NEET, around half are actively looking for work, with the rest often having more complex personal circumstances.

### Nothing to do?

One of the challenges of leaving school or college is that a young person loses a lot of the structure that they have been used to since starting school at the age of four or five. It is all too easy to allow a short break after finishing studies to stretch out into an extended period of inactivity. Others might become inactive as a result of dropping out of a course or perhaps because they have been ill or have been caring for someone else, such as a parent or sibling. If a young person finds themselves inactive, it is important that they seek help to figure out what options are open to them. Applying for jobs is a good start, as is investigating courses at the local FE college or university. They may also find a visit to the National Careers Service or Jobcentre Plus will put them in touch with expert help that will get them active again.

THE CAREERS &  
ENTERPRISE  
COMPANY

**The Careers & Enterprise Company**

2-7 Clerkenwell Green

Clerkenwell

London EC1R 0DE

[www.careersandenterprise.co.uk](http://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk)