

Education and employment options

Helping your teenager choose courses in year 9

If your son or daughter is about to enter year 9 at school, they'll soon face one of their first big decisions in life – which subjects to study in years 10 and 11? The choices they make now could determine what opportunities are open to them later in life, so it's vital they take time to consider all the different options open to them. The careers education they're already receiving will help them develop the skills they need to make realistic choices. Year 9 tutors, subject teachers and other staff will also offer advice and support. It's important to let your teenager make their own decisions, but they need your support to make sure the reasons behind their decisions are sound and realistic.

Everyone has to take a core group of subjects, including English, maths, science and IT, but their school will also offer a range of entitlement an/or optional courses. You'll probably be given an options booklet by the school and also be invited to a parents or options evening. It's important that you find out as much as possible about the courses on offer, as not all schools will offer the same choice of subjects. Choices should be based on your teenager's interests and abilities, not on what their friends are doing or whether they think a subject will be an easy option. To help your teenager make informed choices encourage them to think about:

- What subjects do they enjoy?
- What subjects are they good at?
- Are they keeping an open mind about new subjects and qualifications?
- How do they like to learn?
- What are their interests outside school?
- Do they have a career in mind?
- If so, will they require specific qualifications at GCSE and beyond?
- In the longer term, are they thinking about higher education? If they are, find out more about the Aimhigher initiative from the website

www.aimhigher.ac.uk/essex

Connexions produces a leaflet, '*Post-14 options*' for year 9 students – make sure your teenager receives a copy from their school or Connexions Centre/One Stop Shop.

Pathways through education are now much more flexible and students can choose which route best suits them. Every qualification on offer is linked to a progression route, and on their learning pathway students are able to move easily from one pathway to another.

The most important thing is to keep their options open by choosing a broad and balanced range of subjects.

Remember that your teenager's Connexions Personal Adviser can also support them in making their subject choices. They can provide information and advice about courses, training opportunities and careers to help your son or daughter make decisions and plan for their future.

You and your teenager can also access www.stepon.org the online 14-19 prospectus. This is an easy to use website that will give your son or daughter all the information they need on local learning opportunities.

A range of significant education reforms are planned for young people aged 14-19; they are designed to help all young people fulfil their potential and enjoy ongoing success in learning, work and life. A major aim of these reforms is to raise standards so that all young people have the right skills to meet the demands of a rapidly changing world and can continue learning throughout their lives.

Questions to ask at parent's/options evenings

- What courses are available?
- How many sessions each week are dedicated to the course?
- Is there any opportunity for work experience?
- How big are the teaching groups?
- What facilities/equipment are available to students?
- Is there any additional cost for equipment for vocational courses, or for field trips?
- What exam results did students achieve last year?
- What did students move on to last year?

Qualifications

The main qualification taken by students at key stage 4 (years 10 and 11) is the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE). GCSE two-year courses are available in familiar subjects such as history and biology, but there are also applied GCSEs in subjects that take a more practical approach, for example engineering, media studies and manufacturing. Young people can also choose to take GCSEs as short courses, equivalent to half a full GCSE.

Changes to GCSEs

- The main change to GCSEs is the introduction of internal assessment in place of coursework, where pupils will do projects under controlled conditions in school.
- From September 2009, GCSE coursework in nine subjects, including English literature, geography and history, is to be replaced by internal assessment.

Good English, maths and IT skills are seen as essential for adult life and are important to and valued by employers. These 'functional skills' will become part of all qualifications, including GCSEs, Diplomas and Apprenticeships. They will also be available as stand-alone qualifications from 2010.

As well as GCSEs there may be the opportunity to get work-related qualifications through courses like catering or construction. This could involve spending part of the week with an employer, at college or with a training provider. Ask about what's on offer at your teenager's school.

The Diploma

Students can do a Diploma alongside or instead of GCSEs, and they continue to study English, mathematics and ICT. This is a new qualification based around a different style of teaching and learning. There are ten Diplomas available now with more coming soon.

- The Diploma combines classroom learning with practical hands-on experience, including the chance to spend at least ten days with an employer.
- It has compulsory and optional elements. The compulsory elements cover the main things that your teenager needs to know. The optional elements can be specialist courses that give your teenager greater understanding of their chosen subject area, or something completely different that will broaden their studies.
- Assessment includes written examinations and coursework.
- All Diploma students complete a project to demonstrate the knowledge and skills that they have gained.

There are three levels of Diploma:

- The **Foundation Diploma** is a Level 1 qualification. It is broadly equivalent to 5 GCSEs.
- The **Higher Diploma** is a Level 2 qualification. It is broadly equivalent to 7 GCSEs.
- The **Advanced Diploma**, for those over 16, is a Level 3 qualification. It takes broadly the same amount of time to do as 3.5 A levels.

An alternative to this is a **Progression Diploma** (also Level 3) which takes about the same amount of time to do as 2.5 A levels. This will suit students who do not wish to complete a whole Advance Diploma.

Diplomas available in September 2009:

- Business, Administration and Finance
- Construction and the Built Environment
- Creative and Media
- Engineering
- Environmental and Land-based Studies
- Hair and Beauty Studies
- Hospitality
- Information Technology
- Manufacturing and Product Design
- Society, Health and Development

The Diploma is a new qualification so it is not yet available everywhere. Check what is on offer in your area by looking at your online 14-19 Area Prospectus at www.stepon.org and talking to your son or daughter's school.

The National Qualifications Framework

Qualifications Framework Level	Level Indicators	Examples of Qualifications
Levels 4–8	Involve specialist, in-depth learning about a specific occupation or area of study.	Degrees, Higher National Diplomas and Certificates, NVQs Levels 4 & 5, postgraduate qualifications
Level 3	Develop detailed knowledge, understanding and skills in a subject, specific work area or a broad economic sector. Universities expect most applicants to be qualified to this level.	GCE AS and A levels, Advanced and Progression Diploma, NVQ Level 3, VRQ Level 3, BTEC National Awards, International Baccalaureate, City & Guilds Advanced Awards
Level 2	Build knowledge, understanding and skills	GCSE grades A*-C, Higher Diploma,

	in a subject, a specific work area or a broad economic sector. They enable people to use their learning in a wider range of tasks, and are seen as the minimum level required by employers.	NVQ Level 2, VRQ Level 2, BTEC First Diplomas and City & Guilds Intermediate Awards
Level 1	Improve basic knowledge, understanding and skills and the ability to apply learning to everyday situations.	GCSE grades D–G, Foundation Diploma, NVQ Level 1, VRQ Level 1, BTEC Introductory or City & Guilds Foundation Awards
Entry Level	Develop basic knowledge, understanding and skills in a particular subject or area.	Entry Level Certificates

Key:

GCSE: General Certificate of Secondary Education – the main qualification taken by the majority of students at Key Stage 4

GCE: General Certificate of Education – AS and A levels, available in school sixth forms, sixth form colleges and FE colleges

NVQ: National Vocational Qualification – these are job specific qualifications that will help your teenager develop practical skills

VRQ: Vocationally Related Qualification – these are work related qualifications that cover industries such as healthcare, public services and hospitality

BTEC: Vocational qualifications offered in a wide range of subjects and at different levels

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Visit **www.stepon.org** for local learning opportunities for 14-19 year olds.

Everything you need in one place

- find a school, college or training provider
- find a course/qualification
- find out what's available in your area

For accurate and up to date details provided by schools, colleges and training providers, there's only one place to look – **www.stepon.org**