


Which qualifications will enable your students to progress to Russell Group universities?

There are a wide range of different qualifications available for students to study at age 16. This short guide provides an overview of some of the different qualifications which are available and considers whether they will enable students to progress to Russell Group universities. You may wish to mention certain aspects of your school or college's qualifications provision (such as whether or not you offer AS levels or vocational qualifications) in applicants' UCAS references or on your school or college's website.

A levels

Most Russell Group universities make offers based on three grades at A level (or in Highers or Advanced Highers). A levels continue to provide excellent preparation for higher education and students who take A levels and succeed are likely to be able to access a wide range of different courses at a wide range of different universities. Students should be aware that many courses will have certain A level subject pre-requisites. Some universities might have lists of non-preferred subjects, especially for certain courses and may expect all three A levels to have been taken at the same time. The **Informed Choices**  website can help students understand which A level subjects may be required for particular degree courses.

Students are not necessarily advantaged by taking four A level subjects as opposed to three. Nor are they typically disadvantaged if they do not take AS level qualifications. Students studying for science A levels in England receive a separate 'pass' or 'not classified' grade for the practical element of the course. Some universities will require students to pass the practical elements of their science A levels, even if they are not applying for a science degree.

International Baccalaureate

Russell Group universities typically accept the International Baccalaureate (IB). Just as universities may specify certain A level subject pre-requisites, they often also specify certain higher-level subjects and grades required in the IB for entry to particular courses.

Advanced Welsh Baccalaureate

Many Russell Group universities accept the Advanced Welsh Baccalaureate. A good pass in the Core Skills Challenge Certificate alongside two A levels (or equivalent) will meet entry requirements for some Russell Group universities, although not all.

Core maths

Russell Group universities value mathematics skills for many of their courses and many 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 mathematics 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.

Cambridge Pre-U

Most Russell Group universities typically accept the Cambridge Pre-U. Some students might apply with a combination of A level and Pre-U qualifications. A student's choice of Pre-U Principal Subjects which determine which university courses are open to them and students should not choose the same subjects for both Pre-U and A level. Teachers and advisers should be aware that Pre-U is being withdrawn with the last examinations taking place in 2023.

Extended Project Qualification (EPQ)

Many Russell Group universities consider the EPQ to be good preparation for higher education study. Universities do not require the EPQ, though some universities may make lower A level grade offers to students who have achieved a good pass in the EPQ.

Vocational qualifications

These include Pearson's BTEC qualifications, Cambridge Technicals and CACHE Diplomas. Many Russell Group universities welcome students studying vocational qualifications for some of their courses. Some students might apply to university with a combination of vocational and A level qualifications.

Students should be aware that whilst they may be accepted into a Russell Group university with vocational qualifications, this might only be for degree courses which are closely related to their existing area of study. There are also some universities that do not accept vocational qualifications for any of their courses. Some universities may also specify that students achieve certain scores in individual modules.

Under current government proposals, certain vocational qualifications may no longer be funded for 16-19 year olds in future (see further below for more details).

Access qualifications

Many Russell Group universities welcome applicants studying an Access to HE Diploma for some courses. These qualifications are more commonly studied by mature students. Applicants should check entry requirements with individual universities.

T levels

T levels are new technical qualifications available to 16 year olds in England. They last two years and are equivalent to studying for three A levels. They combine a mixture of classroom learning with on the job experience.


Some Russell Group universities have yet to decide how they will treat T level qualifications. Some universities have said they will accept T levels for entry on to some of their undergraduate degrees, though this may depend on the T level subject and degree course. Other universities have indicated that they do not consider T levels to be suitable preparation for their programmes.

Post-16 qualifications reform in England

The government is currently in the process of reforming qualifications for 16-19 year olds in England. In the future, at age 16 students will be encouraged to either follow an academic pathway or a technical pathway. Most of those students on the former pathway will study for A levels and most students on the latter pathway will study for T levels.

Over time, vocational qualifications (such as BTEC qualifications) which have content which overlaps with new T level qualifications will be defunded. Legislation to bring about these reforms is expected to be brought to parliament in 2022 and the reforms are expected to be completed by 2024.



For further details on supporting students to access university without A level qualifications, see the Advancing Access resource on **Alternative routes into competitive universities** .