

A Specialist College - The Perfect Choice?

The majority of post-16 institutions feature a broad menu of courses, but some focus on one kind. These are known as specialist colleges, and among the most popular are those offering:

- Art and Design
- Dance
- Drama
- Music
- Agriculture and Horticulture
- Construction Trades.

The emphasis at most Further Education institutions is on courses at Level 2 or 3. However, many specialist colleges offer those students capable of it the chance to progress to a degree qualification (L4), something increasingly required for jobs inviting higher-level skills or responsibility. Not having to change institution after Level 3 may make this route even more appealing to some.

Each specialist college sees itself (and is perceived) as offering training distinctly tailored to its vocational field. This is often reflected in a rigorous selection process, which, besides an interview, may include:

- a written test
- an individual audition
- a group exercise
- in-depth discussion of relevant work experience

considerable weight being attached to what these seem to reveal about the applicant.

Where an audition is involved, notice will be given to allow candidates to prepare a specific piece (e.g. for Music or Drama), and not be surprised if asked to take part in a group presentation (e.g. for Dance).

FE colleges in general allow some 'wriggle room' if a course isn't to a student's liking, with a change of subject or level often being possible. This can be less true of specialist ones, though, making it vital to research them thoroughly ahead of applying.

Where a sixth form has been accorded specialist provider status for a particular subject, this

will still be taught within a wider curriculum. By contrast, a specialist college wholly devoted to a single discipline will (in all probability) offer facilities and a level of staff expertise in it to rival virtually any school's.

Your son/daughter should attend an open day or similar event which allows them to see a specialist college close-up. They should also have ready questions to ask staff members present, which might usefully cover such as:

- the success-rate for leavers into work or further study
- their actual destinations, and what they're engaged in
- how being there might develop them as a student and as a person
- their likely involvement in performance and/or display events.

Where possible, your son/daughter should talk to current students, and look at their work. In such as Art and Design institutions, this is certain to be exhibited, and provides an idea of the standard of teaching.

Your son/daughter may find only one suitable specialist college within travelling distance. If so, he/she should also apply to at least one other local sixth form or FE college. Normal competition alone encourages this, but even applicants holding offers frequently change their minds, so having a back-up option is sensible.

Art and Design Colleges usually ask interviewees to bring a portfolio of their work. This helps by:

- allowing staff to assess their ability and potential
- showing the applicant how the course might develop his/her skills
- how he/she might begin to employ previously-unfamiliar media
- communicating his/her enthusiasm for the subject.

Whatever his/her preferred subject, your son/daughter should be ready to say what inspired them to produce a piece of work, and discuss the pros and cons of the process itself. The course menu within a specialist college can often permit a slight but advantageous change of direction.

Where the local college doesn't offer a preferred course, it may nevertheless have links with the nearest which does, possibly even running daily transport there. It's certainly worth exploring this before dismissing an institution as too distant.