

What to Expect from a Further Education College?

If your child is staying on in education after GCSE-level study, sixth form is often the natural choice. But it isn't the only choice and it might not be the right choice for your son or daughter. Here, we take a look at an alternative setting, the further education (FE) college.

So what's different about further education? Further education colleges are open to students aged 16 (or sometimes 14) and over. Although these colleges attract students of all ages, some courses are aimed specifically at 16 to 18 year olds. Other differences from sixth form institutions include the qualifications or subjects available, the entry requirements and the facilities.

Subjects and qualifications

While A levels and some vocational qualifications are offered at both sixth forms and FE colleges, certain subjects are only available in colleges. This is particularly the case where specialist equipment or facilities are required - bakery or engineering courses, for example. Some colleges offer a huge variety of subjects, while others specialise in a particular subject area, like land-based studies.

Vocational courses are offered at different levels, with the level at which students start determined by the grades achieved at GCSE. Most school-leavers start at level one, two or three. If your son or daughter needs to start with a qualification at a lower level, look out for foundation or entry-level courses. Some FE colleges also offer higher education (university-level) courses at levels four, five and six.

Your son or daughter need not rule out university if they're studying a vocational qualification. Certain vocational courses at level three will still provide a route to university; college staff will be able to advise further.

Entry requirements

If your son or daughter wants to study A levels in an FE college, the entry requirements are unlikely to differ much from sixth form: generally, grades 4/C or above at GCSE, with 5s, 6s or higher often specified.

For vocational qualifications, students achieving grades 4/C or above at GCSE might choose a level three course, often studied over two years. Students who've just missed out on 4s/Cs at GCSE start with a year of study at level two, while students who get lower than 3s/Ds at GCSE could start on level one courses.

On certain courses which build practical skills, everyone starts at level one, regardless of the grades they get at GCSE.

Freedom

Generally, college students tend to get more freedom than their counterparts at sixth form, with more relaxed rules and dress code. Calling a tutor by his or her first name is commonplace. Students are treated like adults and asked to take more responsibility for their own learning. Needless to say, this suits some young people more than others. Your son or daughter would need to adjust to the differences at college fairly quickly to allow them to make good progress with their studies.

Timetable

Post-16, the timetable is a bit different too. Students will have free periods and won't necessarily be expected to attend every day. The college day might be longer with lessons or tutorials taking place as late as 5 or 6pm. Free time can be used for coursework or further research. Students might spend the time volunteering or working part-time to build their

experience. There will also be activities to get involved with, from fitness classes to student politics.

Facilities

Public restaurants, theatres, salons and workshops are common in FE colleges, allowing your son or daughter to use the kit and technology that might be common in industry. Many of the staff have a background in their sector too, giving an insight into the realities and the challenges of the workplace.

Experiencing the world of work

Vocational study in college should bring the opportunity to gain workplace experience or develop the employability skills employers are asking for. Many courses include placements, giving your son or daughter experience and the chance to test out their career ideas. There are also realistic working environments, like college health spas, travel agencies or farms, where students can practise their skills or work with customers.

So is FE college right for your son or daughter?

If your child answers 'yes' to one or more of the following questions, then it might be worth finding out more about FE.

- Are you ready for a change from the school setting?
- Can you manage your own time effectively (or could you learn to do so)?
- Do you prefer to be treated as an adult?
- Are you interested in vocational, rather than purely academic, options?
- Are you ready to focus on one subject or job area?
- Are you looking for a specialist subject or the use of specialist facilities?

If FE college isn't right for your son or daughter, which other educational options could they consider?

- Sixth form or sixth form college
- Private training providers
- University technical colleges
- Studio schools

See [Options at 16](#) for further details.

Find out more about what's available in your area at www.gov.uk/courses-qualifications.

If you think a further education college might suit your son or daughter, you should be able to talk it through with careers staff at school. It is also worth approaching your local FE college to find out about open events or other opportunities to visit.

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