

Studying GCSEs and A-levels in custody

GCSEs and A-levels have been the gold standard educational qualifications for decades, and they are still highly prized by employers and universities. Some learners in prison may not have achieved good grades whilst at school or college but, if you want to try again, most GCSE subjects are available through distance learning courses funded by PET.

You don't always need GCSEs or A-levels

Level 2 English and Maths are available to study in most prisons, and are often seen as broadly equivalent to GCSEs. According to the UCAS website, Level 2 functional skills are at the same level as GCSE grade C or above (existing GCSE qualifications) or Level 4 or above for new GCSEs (GCSEs are now graded 9 to 1, rather than A* to G). However, whilst the level of the functional skills qualification is the same as that of a GCSE, the breadth of content is narrower.

But you don't always need GCSEs to get where you want to be. For example, if you have passed Level 2 English (and also Maths where it is relevant) then you should be eligible for PET funding for a wide range of distance learning courses that can lead directly to employment in sectors such as fitness training, business, or health and safety.

Similarly, you don't necessarily need A-levels to get on a university degree course. If you have achieved Level 2 English and Maths, satisfy the nationality criteria, and are within eight years of release, PET can usually fund you to study an Open University Access course. If you pass the Access course then you can be accepted on an Open University degree course.

Then why bother with GCSEs and A-levels?

Having good GCSE and A Level results in certain subjects could be your key to getting into college, university, or a stepping stone into your ideal industry. If you're unhappy with your current results, you may want to consider a retake. Even if you're looking to move out of education, many employers view good GCSE results as prerequisites.

The more exclusive universities often still prefer candidates with good GCSE grades in English and Maths. Such universities may also prefer A-levels to Access courses. Also, some traditional employers may also prefer actual **GCSEs** in English and Maths rather than the level 2 equivalents.

Learners with long sentences

Prisoners with sentences over eight years are not eligible for Open University funding, and therefore studying for GCSEs and A-levels, or indeed any of our other courses, can be a productive way to spend your time in the interim. If you have passed level 2 courses then you should be ready to progress to A-levels, although if you are not confident (for example if starting a new subject like Sociology) you may prefer to begin with a GCSE. If you have the ability and a thirst for knowledge, we would be delighted to consider funding you to study a number of different A-level subjects if you have sufficient time.

Other factors to consider

- Many prisons are not currently able to facilitate GCSE and A-level exams so you will need to either move to a prison that does, or wait until ROTL or release to take your exam
- Science and language GCSE/A-levels are often not available in prison, requiring practical lab work and oral examinations respectively, both of which are difficult to support inside
- PET can only fund one course at a time
- GCSE courses generally require at least 9 months' study time. The A-level (Part 1) takes a similar amount of time
- The National Extension College (NEC) provide A-levels to prison learners as Part 1 and Part 2. We will initially fund Part 1 and when student complete the course they will be able to choose to either take the AS exam or continue on to a Part 2 to build up to the full A-level

How to choose a course subject

- What subjects are you genuinely interested in? It is much easier to study something that you are passionate about
- What are you good at? At school or college, did you find certain subjects easier than others? Similarly, if you used to struggle in a certain lesson then perhaps this subject isn't for you
- Do you have a certain course or career in mind, and if so is a certain GCSE or A-level subject required in order to progress towards your goal?
- Research the courses. Subjects like Psychology and Philosophy, for example, sound fascinating but it would be unwise to select a course without fully understanding what is actually involved. The course content is often very different to what students expect. It is essential to at least look at the syllabus to get a clearer idea of what you will actually be studying
- Get advice from prison education staff or by writing to FREEPOST Prisoners' Education Trust

GCSE subjects currently available

Business Studies
 Combined Science
 English Language
 English Literature
 History
 Maths
 Psychology
 Sociology

A-level subjects currently available

Business
 Classical Civilisation
 Economics
 English Language
 English Literature
 History
 Law
 Maths
 Politics
 Philosophy
 Psychology
 Religious Studies
 Sociology

If you have any queries, please contact PET:

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