

Understanding the UK education system

The education system in the UK is currently undergoing perhaps more change than at any time since the 1944 Butler Education Act. There are now a huge range of schools with widely differing funding arrangements, governance and legal obligations. This article is a basic guide to these different types of schools. We will regularly publish updates to keep it in line with new legislation.

▶ Educational requirements in the UK

▣ England, Wales and Northern Ireland

By law, all children of compulsory school age (5 to 16) must receive a full time education that is suited to their age, ability, aptitude and special educational needs (SEN). Until 1988 schools were free to decide what they taught their pupils, with Religious Education being the only compulsory subject. As a result of the Education Reform Act 1988 The National Curriculum of England was developed and then introduced in 1992. Its aim was to make sure that all pupils had a balanced education by stating the topics that should be taught and the standards expected to be attained by pupils.

The National Curriculum defines four Key Stages, which breakdown as follows:

Key Stage 1: Years 1 and 2 (up to age 7)

Key Stage 2: Years 3, 4, 5 and 6 (age 7 to 11)

Key Stage 3: Years 7, 8 and 9 (age 11 to 14)

Key Stage 4: Years 10 and 11 (age 14 to 16)

The Foundation Stage, which represents early years learning (age 3 to the end of Reception Year, which is pre-Year 1) became part of the National Curriculum in 2002. Key Stage 1 and 2 are usually taught in primary schools and Key Stage 3 and 4 are usually taught in secondary schools. Most pupils transfer from primary to secondary school at age 11 years. However, a system of middle schools also exists: here pupils are transferred from primary school at either age 8 or 9 years, then onto secondary education at age 12 or 13 years.

The National Curriculum consists of a set of core and foundation subjects. The core subjects are English maths and science, and the foundation subjects are design and technology, information and

communication technology (ICT), history, geography, art & design, music, physical education, modern foreign languages (Key Stage 3 only) and citizenship (Key Stages 3 and 4 only). Religious education is taught according to agreed local syllabus.

All pupils in England, except those at independent (i.e. fee paying or private) schools and the new academies are required to adhere to the National Curriculum. Wales and Northern Ireland largely follow the National Curriculum requirements, with the exception that Welsh is also a core subject in Wales and that in Northern Ireland schools can develop additional curriculum elements to meet the needs of their pupils.

Pupils are assessed by National Curriculum tests at the end of each Key Stage, with Key Stage 4 being assessed by levels of achievement acquired at General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) level. Having completed GCSEs, pupils have a choice of whether to continue with further education at school or college through AS-level, A-level or vocational qualifications or to undertake employment.

✘ **Scotland**

Scotland has its own distinctive and flexible qualification framework that is separate from the National Curriculum based framework used in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The curriculum in Scotland is not set by law, placing responsibility on local authorities and schools.

The Scottish curriculum is divided into the 5-14 Curriculum and the Standard Grade for 14 to 16 year olds. After Standard Grade pupils have the opportunity to take Intermediate, Higher and Advanced Higher qualifications, although some students may take Intermediate courses at 14 to 16.

The year groups in Scotland are divided into primary (P) and secondary (S), with the 5-14 curriculum covering P1 to P7 and S1 to S2; the Standard Grade programme in S3 and S4; Higher Grade in S5 (but also available at S6) and Advanced Higher taken by the most able pupils in S6. The first year of secondary schooling (S1) is equivalent to Year 8 in the rest of the UK, therefore those in Scotland have one year less in secondary school education than those in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The 5-14 Curriculum is divided into six attainment levels, A to F. Assessment of pupils' attainment levels is taken by individuals or groups when the teacher considers them to be ready; whole classes or year groups do not sit tests at this grade.

▶ **Reforms for 14-19 education**

✘ **England**

In February 2005 the DfES announced a major change to the 14-19 curriculum, with the aim of promoting vocational qualifications as a viable, highly regarded alternative to academic qualifications. This shift came on top of the introduction of eight vocational GCSEs which were introduced in 2002. Although the proposals are still in development, it seems that the choice will be for young people to either continue to take a wide range of GCSEs or opt out of some of these and take a diploma instead. Some key subjects, like maths, English and ICT, cannot be opted out of at this point. Diplomas are meant to be more practical and have an increased emphasis on personalised learning and learning about the world of work.

The DfES has stated publicly that:

“Diplomas are exciting and innovative new qualifications for 14-19 year olds. They have been created to provide a real alternative to more traditional education and qualifications and are the most important changes to the country's education system since the introduction of GCSEs. Diplomas will give young people a fully rounded qualification, which combines theoretical and practical learning, including functional

English, Maths and ICT, to equip them with the skills, knowledge and understanding they need for further or higher education and long-term employability.”

Fourteen diplomas were initially proposed, introduced in stages over the next few years.

✧ September 2008

IT

Society, Health and Development

Engineering

Creative & Media

Construction and the Built Environment

Land-based & Environmental

✧ September 2009

Manufacturing & Product Design

Hair & Beauty Studies

Business Administration & Finance

Hospitality

Public Services

✧ September 2010

Sport & Leisure

Retail

Travel & Tourism

In addition The Secretary of State announced, in October 2007, that there will be a further three Diploma lines, in Science, Humanities and Languages. It was also announced that the review of A levels planned for 2008 would be postponed and become part of a wider review of all 14-19 qualifications in 2013.

More information about the 14-19 reforms is on the DfES 14-19 website at <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/14-19>

✧ Scotland

There is no distinct 14-19 phase in Scotland. A Curriculum for Excellence (ACfE) introduces a single-phase curriculum from age 3-18, which is being implemented over the period from 2004 to 2008. ACfE has four main purposes:

✧ to widen pupils’ opportunities for progression and prepare them for further learning;

✧ to ease pupils’ transition from school to further learning, training or employment;

✧ to broaden pupils’ curriculum choices; and

✧ to enrich pupils’ educational experiences.

ACfE has been designed to encourage inter-disciplinary working and provide pupils with the chance to gain vocational learning experiences post-14. Alongside ACfE, the Scottish Executive is piloting ‘Skills for Work’, a programme which aims to provide pupils with vocational learning opportunities. The pilot is now in its second year and most local authorities and colleges in Scotland are involved. Over 4,000 pupils in schools are participating in the pilot. The programme is designed for all young people and covers all vocational areas. The courses offered within Skills for Work are intended to be an integral part of the school curriculum and should lead to nationally recognised qualifications. Skills for Work should help schools fulfil the

requirement that every pupil aged 14+ must have the opportunity to participate in work-based vocational learning that is linked to a relevant qualification.

❖ Wales

Learning Pathways provides the framework for transforming 14-19 education in Wales. There are six key elements to Learning Pathways.

1. An individually tailored learning pathway leading to approved qualifications and recognising employment and activities outside the formal learning environment.
2. Wider choice and flexibility from a range of domains, including academic and vocational qualifications and work-based learning, along with the opportunity to vary the speed of progression.
3. A learning core consisting of skills, knowledge, understanding, values and experiences, covering minimum requirements and enhancements, tailored to an individual's needs and interests.
4. Entitlement to support from a learning coach which includes the opportunity to discuss learning and progress on a regular basis.
5. Access to personal support.
6. An entitlement to impartial careers advice and guidance.

❖ Northern Ireland

14-19 reforms in Northern Ireland must be set within the context of the Government's response to the recent Bain Report, Schools for the Future: Funding, Strategy, Sharing. This is likely to result in a significant shake-up of the whole education system in Northern Ireland. The proposals include rationalising education provision which could result in many schools merging or closing. The picture is complicated further by the fact that devolved government may return to Northern Ireland in the near future.

▶ Types of school in the UK

❖ England

Under the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 there are three main categories of school:

➤ Community

➤ Foundation

➤ Voluntary (divided into Controlled and Aided)

They replaced the previous categories of mainstream state school: county, voluntary controlled, special agreement, voluntary aided and grant-maintained (GM). Statutory proposals have to be published to open, close, and significantly change such schools. The proposals have to be approved under local decision-making arrangements by the LEA, school organisation committee or schools adjudicator.

Schools in all three categories have a lot in common. They work in partnership with other schools and the LEAs, they receive funding from LEAs and they have to deliver the national curriculum. But each category has its own characteristics. Any of these secondary schools can apply to be designated as a specialist school in a subject area. Current subjects include: technology (technology, science and mathematics), languages (MFL), sports (PE and sport), arts (fine, performing and media arts). The schools meet full national curriculum requirements, but have a special focus on the chosen specialisms.

➤ Community Schools

In Community Schools (formerly county schools), the LEA employs the schools staff, own the schools land

and buildings and have primary responsibility for deciding the arrangements for admitting pupils.

‣ **Foundation Schools**

At Foundation Schools, the governing body employ the schools staff and have primary responsibility for admission arrangements. The school land and buildings are owned by the governing body or by a charitable foundation. Many of these schools were formerly grant maintained schools. The Foundation appoints the majority of governors.

‣ **Voluntary Aided Schools**

In Voluntary Aided schools (many of which are church schools) the governing body employs the staff and decide admission arrangements. The school land and buildings are normally owned by a charitable foundation. The governing body contributes towards the capital costs of running the school. Most aided schools are linked to either the Church of England or the Roman Catholic Church, but there are schools linked to other faith groups and a few non-denominational schools.

‣ **Voluntary Controlled Schools**

Voluntary Controlled schools are almost always church schools, and the land and buildings are often owned by a charitable foundation. However, the LEA employ the schools staff and has primary responsibility for admission arrangements.

This is not an exhaustive list of the types of schools currently found in England. Others schools includes:

‣ **Pupil Referral Units**

Pupil Referral Units are a type of school established and maintained by a local education authority to provide education for children of compulsory school age who may otherwise not receive suitable education. The focus of the units is on getting pupils back into a mainstream school, and pupils may include teenage mothers, pupils excluded from school, school phobics and pupils in the assessment phase of a statement.

‣ **Grammar Schools**

Grammar schools select all, or almost all, of their pupils by reference to high academic ability. There are currently just over 160 grammar schools in England across just eleven counties.

‣ **Academies**

Since 2000, "Academy" in England can mean a type of secondary school which is independent but publicly funded and publicly run. As such, Academies are outside the control of the Local Authorities in which they are situated. This type of school was known as a City Academy for the first few years but the term was changed to "Academy" by an amendment in the Education Act 2002. They are also not subject to the requirements of the National Curriculum. There are currently just over 100 Academies open with up to 100 more in planning.

Note: Education in Wales is divided into broadly similar categories, although control over the education system was devolved to Wales when the Welsh Assembly came into being in 1999. One of the few education matters that still rest with central government in England is terms and conditions for teachers.

🇪🇺 **Scotland**

‣ **Local schools**

The education authority decides what is taught at the school and how pupils are examined and assessed. It allows parents to choose which school their children attend and publishes information on each school in its area. Each education authority school should have a school board - made up of parents, teachers and members of the local community - that can have wide powers including involvement in recruitment of staff

below the level of head teacher.

➤ **Special schools**

A special school is designed to meet the needs of those who cannot attend ordinary school and have 'recorded' special needs. The teachers and other staff are usually specially trained in appropriate methods of teaching and care. A small number of children in special schools attend on a residential basis so that they can receive full-time care.

➤ **Denominational schools**

These are run in the same way as other education authority schools, except that teachers may be selected on the basis of religious beliefs as well as educational qualifications. Special time may be set aside for religious services and an unpaid religious supervisor, possibly the local priest, will report to the education authority on the religious instruction in the school.

❖ **Northern Ireland**

Northern Ireland's education system has an extremely complex structure. There are 10 official bodies involved in the management and administration of the system as well as a number of voluntary bodies that play a significant role.

Secondary education is largely selective with pupils going to grammar schools or secondary schools according to academic ability. There is also a large voluntary school sector and Catholic maintained schools.

There has been significant growth in the development and provision of integrated education throughout Northern Ireland. Integrated education is the initiative to bring together in one school pupils, teachers and governors from Catholic and Protestant traditions.

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