



The English School System

The education system in the UK is very strict and, although each of the four countries within the UK have different variations, the general system is the same. Today we'll focus on the educational system provided in England. The academic year starts in September and consists of three **terms**.

The education system is divided by age and there are four different categories: *early years*, *primary school*, *secondary school* and *further education*, often called sixth form. Of course, after this, **students** can choose to go on to **university**, jobs, internships or other higher education institutions.

The law states in the UK that all students aged between four/five and sixteen must receive full-time education, but after the age of sixteen, it is the **pupil's** choice as to whether they'd like to continue **studying** or not.

In the United Kingdom, there is a mixture of independent (private) schools and state schools.

State Schools

The majority of British school children go to state school, which is completely free and provided by the government. If you enrol your children in a state school, you must go to the local school in your catchment area, unless it is oversubscribed, in which case you may go to a neighbouring school instead. Most state schools tend to be mixed gender with both boys and girls in the **lessons**.

There are different types of state schools and these mostly depend on who is in charge, who employs the staff, where the funding comes from and what the entrance requirements are to the school. Examples include comprehensive schools, grammar schools, community schools, foundation schools, trust schools, voluntary-aided and voluntary-controlled schools.

State schools must follow the National Curriculum, which was brought in by law in 1988 and this provides a framework for education for all students between the ages of 5 and 18. The National Curriculum sets out four Key Stages of education. At the end of each Key Stage, there are state-run **tests** to measure the overall education of each child, these are called SATs (Standard Attainment Tests).

Independent Schools

There are only a few independent schools, which come at a rather large cost each term. With independent schools, parents can choose any school to attend in the country and there are no geographical restrictions, most of them offer boarding facilities. Although it's not a written rule, most independent schools tend to be boys-only or girls-only schools.

The two main types of independent schools that exist are private schools and academies. More and more schools are converting into academies nowadays, with the freedom of running and managing their own schools, employing their own staff and setting their own curriculum but still receiving the benefits of limited state funding.

Independent schools have a lot more flexibility with what they **teach** their students and they are not bound to follow the National Curriculum, however, they must provide a good all-round education. The education regulator, Ofsted, carries out regular inspections at independent schools to ensure that a good all-round education is provided to their pupils.

Early Years

The first stage of education is early years, which is for three and four year olds. All these children are entitled to 15 hours of free nursery education for 38 weeks a year. This may be in a specialised nursery school or as a reception **class** in a primary school.

Primary School

Kids enter primary school when they are four or five years old, depending on when their birthday falls in the academic year. Some primary schools are separated into infant school (aged 5 to 7/8) and junior school (aged 7/8 to 11/12). This is because there are two important educational stages in primary school.

At infant school you cover Key Stage 1, which includes 10 subjects: English, maths, science, history, geography, art and design, music, design and technology, physical education & swimming and computing. More religious schools also provide religious education at this stage too.

At junior school you cover Key Stage 2, which includes all subjects taught at Key Stage 1 plus an ancient or modern foreign language. Most schools start to add PSHE (personal, social and health education) to teach social skills, emotional health and cover topics like relationships, puberty and sex education. Few schools are now introducing citizenship too, which introduces skills such as debating, critical thinking, politics and law.

At the end of primary school, most students continue at the same school and simply transfer straight into secondary school. Few students move to a different secondary school, whether this be to a different geographical location or simply to go to a private school instead.

In the past, there was a compulsory exam called the 11+, which was to test the education and skills of a child after primary school. This is no longer an official state exam but many schools still continue this and, if a child moves to a new secondary school, this exam is more than likely to happen as an “entrance exam”.

Secondary School

As we move on to secondary school, we find the next two Key Stages. Key Stage 3 is the start of secondary school aged 11-13. According to the National Curriculum, all 11 subjects taught at Key Stage 2 must be continued into Key Stage 3.

The most important stage of secondary school is Key Stage 4, which focuses on the skills required to pass the compulsory state exams at the age of 15/16 - GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education). All students across the UK must take these exams and they require the basic knowledge of each subject. All students must take maths, English and some form of science, but students can take anything between 8 and 12 subjects. Each school has their own rule for which subjects must be taken. For example, private schools tend to require at least one modern foreign language and one humanity. The curriculum for each GCSE is set by an independent **examination** board and all schools will more or less follow the same curriculum.

Students select the subjects they'd like to take for their GCSEs at the end of Key Stage 3 and the two years of Key Stage 4 only focus on these GCSE exams. In the past, GCSEs were **marked** from A* (the best) to G (the worst) but the system recently changed to a number marking system instead. Now, grade 1 is the best and grade 9 is the worst, with 5 being an average pass.

Further Education

Further Education is not compulsory by law in the UK although if you intend on going to university, this is required. Some students find they are not suited to educational institutions and, instead, go out to get a job or an internship.

The most common option of Further Education is sixth form, which most secondary schools also provide. In these final two years at sixth form, students work towards state exams called A-levels (**advanced level** exams) and these are required for university entrance. Upon applying, universities will ask what your grades are for these public exams. Students can take between 3 and 5 A-levels and they focus on what they want to study or do later in life. A* is the best grade and G is the worst.

There are some alternatives to sixth form though, some students move to a vocational or technical **college** instead and take BTECs (Business and Technology Education Council). The subjects studied for BTECs tend to be non-traditional, such as tourism and travel. If you're looking to study the traditional subjects (e.g. maths, history, English), you need to be taking A-levels instead. BTECs are graded in levels - 1 to 7. You can also apply to university with BTECs and this is becoming more and more popular, however, not all universities accept these qualifications.

Although A-levels and BTECs are the most popular further education qualifications, there are many more that exist. For example, City and Guilds, T-levels, the IB (International Baccalaureate) or other **diplomas** or **licences**.

The names used for all these exams are completely different in Scotland and there are some differences between this system in England and that in Wales and Northern Ireland.