

# The british educational system



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The basic features of the British educational system are the same as they are anywhere else in Europe. There are three recognized stages, with children moving from the first stage (primary) to the second stage (secondary) at around the age of 11. The third (tertiary) stage is 'further' education at university or college. British children start compulsory education at the age of five. Very young children, usually 3 or 4 years old go to nursery school.

Nursery education is voluntary

However, there is quite a lot which distinguishes education in Britain from the way it works in other countries. Compulsory education is free of charge, but parents may spend money on educating their children privately if they want to. Terminology to do with the school system in Britain can be confusing. Schools funded by the government (so free of charge for the parents) are called 'state schools' and the education provided in this way is called 'state education'. This distinguishes it from 'private education', which comprises 'independent schools'.

Some independent schools are known as 'public schools'. So it is important to remember that the term 'public school' in Britain does not mean what you expect. Centuries ago, public schools did provide free education for poor boys, but today they are elite establishments and very private. They became known as 'public schools' in the 19th century, when they started to provide residential places for pupils from outside the locality. The possibility of confusion in the terminology is especially great because in the USA schools organized by the government are called 'public schools'. In Britain today,

only about 8% of children are educated outside the state system, because it is so expensive.

Historical background.

The British government attached little importance to education until the end of the nineteenth century. Still schools and other educational institutions (such as universities) existed in Britain long before the government began to take an interest in education. When it finally did, it did not sweep these institutions away, nor did it always take them over. Most importantly the government left alone the small group of schools (= 'public' schools) which had been used in the nineteenth century (and sometimes even before then) to educate the sons of the upper and upper-middle classes.

Their aim was to prepare young men to take up positions in the higher ranks of professions (law, politics,...). When the pupils from these schools finished their education, they formed the ruling élite, a closed group separate from the rest of society. Among the most famous public schools is Eton College. Eton, an all-boys establishment, has produced 18 British prime ministers since it was founded by King Henry VI in 1440. Stereotypical public schools :

-are for boys only from the age of thirteen onwards, most of whom attended a private 'prep' (= preparatory) school beforehand

-take fee-paying pupils and some scholarship pupils

-are boarding schools -place great emphasis on team sports, rather than on academic achievement

-enforce their rules with the use of physical punishment

-make some of the senior boys 'prefects', which means that they have authority over the other boys and have their own servants (= fags) among the young boys However, this traditional image no longer fits the facts.

There have been a fairly large number of girls' public schools for the last hundred years, and more recently a few schools have started to admit both boys and girls. Many schools admit day pupils as well as boarders, prefects no longer have so much power, fagging has disappeared, there is less emphasis on team sport and more on academic achievement,...

Organization.

It is a characteristic of the British system that there is comparatively little control or uniformity. Central government does not prescribe a detailed programme of learning or determine what books and materials should be used. It says what schoolchildren should learn, but it only offers occasional advice about how they should learn it. Nor does it dictate the exact hours of the school day, the exact dates of holidays or the exact age at which a child must start in full-time education. It does not manage an institution's finances either, it just decides how much money to give it. In general, as many details as possible are left up to the individual institution or the Local Education Authority (LEA, a branch of local government). All the central government does is to ensure the availability of education, and set overall learning objectives which they enforce through a system of inspectors.

' Recent' developments.

Some of the changes that have taken place in British education reflect the wider social process of increased egalitarianism. Before 1965 most children had to take an exam (= the eleven plus exam) at about the age of eleven, at the end of their primary schooling. If they passed this exam, they went to a grammar school where they were taught academic subjects to prepare them for university ; if they failed, they went to a secondary modern school, where they teach practical, job-related subjects, and pupils learn skills like hairdressing or travel and tourism. Many people argued that it was wrong for a person's future life to be decided at so young an age.

The children who went to ' secondary moderns' tended to be seen as ' failures'. Moreover, the system seemed to reinforce class distinctions (more higher class children managed to get into the grammar schools). So the division into grammar and secondary modern schools was changed ! These days, more than 90% of the eleven-year-olds go on to the same local school. These schools are known as ' comprehensive schools' and they offer courses for all levels of ability, providing a wide range of education.

However, the comprehensive system has also had its critics. Many people felt that there should be more choice available and that the educational standards fell during the 1980s. So again major changes were introduced by the government. Foremost of these was the setting up of a national curriculum. For the first time there is now a set of learning objectives for each year, which also has an influence on the subject-matter of teaching. Where Britain has always given a large amount of attention to the arts and humanities, we now get a greater emphasis on science and technology.

## Public exams.

At the ages of seven, eleven and fourteen children have to take national tests (Standard Assessment Tests or SATs) in English, mathematics and science. The exams (General Certificate of Secondary Education or GCSE) which schoolchildren take from the age of about fifteen onwards are not set by the government, but rather by independent examining boards. There are several of these and each school or LEA decides which board's exams its pupils take. Second, the boards publish a separate syllabus for each subject. So there is no unified school-leaving exam or school-leaving certificate. Each subject is examined separately, so you can fail one, but pass others, or get different grades, or take some in year 11 and some later. Different pupils do different numbers of GCSEs and there are many different subject options.

In practice, nearly all pupils do exams in English language, maths and a science subject, and most also do an exam in technology and one in a foreign language, usually French. Five good GCSEs (grades A to C) constitute a school-leaving qualification and 62% of pupils achieve this. Pupils who plan to do A levels and go on to university generally take 8-10 subjects. The GCSE exams have nothing to do with school years as such. They are divorced from the school system. There is nothing to stop a sixty-five year-old doing a few of them for fun.

## Education beyond sixteen and the sixth form

At the age of sixteen, people are free to leave school if they want to, but because the general level of unemployment is now high only a third of the sixteen-year-olds go straight out and look for a job. In the last 20 years there

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has been a great increase in educational opportunities for people at the age of 16 or older. Some secondary schools don't have a 'sixth form', a sixth year which refers to those pupils who are studying beyond the age of sixteen. Those pupils can then go to a Sixth-form College, or College of Further Education. Typically, in the sixth form a pupil spends a whole two years ('lower sixth' and 'upper sixth') studying generally just three subjects in preparation for taking A-level exams (higher-level exams you have to pass if you want to go on to higher education). So at the sixth form stage studies are highly specialized.

#### Further and higher education

Further education is a term used to apply to any education after secondary school, but not including university work. So you don't need A levels for further education. Higher education is education at a university level. The independence of Britain's educational institutions is most noticeable in universities. They make their own choices of who to accept on their courses. There is no right of entry to university for anybody. Students have to fill out an application form on which they write their first choice of university - and then add 4 more in case they are not accepted by the first. All this information is fed into a computer, from which universities can select their students. Universities normally select students on the basis of A-level results and an interview.

Those with better exam grades are more likely to be accepted. In 1960 there were less than twenty-five universities in the whole of Britain, but by now there are well over a hundred institutions which have university status.

Nevertheless, finding a university place is not easy. Universities only tend to take the better students ! Because of this, and also because of the high degree of personal supervision of students, nearly all university students complete their studies. There are no important official or legal distinctions between the various types of university in the country. But it is possible to discern a few broad categories: -Oxbridge : this name denotes the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, both founded in the medieval period. - the old Scottish universities (from 1600 onwards)

-the early nineteenth-century English universities -the older civic (' redbrick') universities : institutes of higher education, usually with a technical bias. Their buildings were of brick, hence the name ' redbrick'. -the campus universities : purpose-built institutions in the countryside. They tend to emphasize relatively new academic disciplines, like e. g. social sciences. -the newer civic universities : originally technical colleges, but they were upgraded to university status. Their most notable feature is flexibility with regard to studying arrangements e. g. interrupted studies.

Degrees in higher education.

On successfully completing a course of studies and thus becoming a graduate usually students get a first degree which is also called a Bachelor's Degree, most commonly a BA or Bachelor of Arts for studying an arts or social science subject or a BSc or Bachelor of Science obtained in one of the sciences. A student who has completed a university course and who is continuing to study for a more advanced qualification or second degree is a postgraduate, this degree being called a Master's Degree : most commonly



MA or Master of Arts and MSc or Master of Science. The highest academic qualification is a Doctorate, usually carrying the title PhD (Doctor of Philosophy). This is a degree awarded to people who have done research in a particular subject and have written an account of it.

## Problems

So far the British educational system all sounds good : British pupils have a good system and lots of good choices to make within it. But all is not well at school. First of all teen violence is increasing in the UK, and about a third of school pupils have admitted carrying a knife, usually for protection. Some schools now use metal detectors, and a ' Be Safe Project' is part of the curriculum. Secondly, the UK has more secondary-school drop-outs or NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training) than any other European country. The number most often given is 10% or one in ten of 16- to 18-year-olds. That's 200, 000 British teenagers leaving school with no qualifications, per year ! Girls and boys drop out for different reasons. Many girls leave school because they are expecting a baby or decide to get married, and boys often drop out to take a job or because they have behavioural difficulties. They may have poor academic and attendance records.

Family problems, poverty and instability all increase the risk of a teenager dropping out. But there's always hope, and there's some evidence that the ' school of hard knocks' (experience) teaches some lessons too. A recent survey showed that more than half the teenagers who dropped out of school at 16 regretted their decision later. Thirty percent of them went back to school within a year, and 59% returned to education within five years.

However, the governments's plan to raise the school-leaving age to 17 by 2013, and to 18 by 2015 has come in for severe criticism. And whatever kind of school British pupils go to, studies show that most of them are unhappy. Several schools now offer ' happiness' classes to combat such problems as bullying, drinking and drugs.