

EDUCATION SYSTEM IN THE UK

Across the UK there are five stages of education: early years, primary, secondary, Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE). Education is compulsory for all children between the ages of 5 (4 in Northern Ireland) and 16. FE is not compulsory and covers non-advanced education which can be taken at further (including tertiary) education colleges and HE institutions (HEIs). The fifth stage, HE, is study beyond GCE A levels and their equivalent which, for most full-time students, takes place in universities and other HEIs and colleges.

Early Years Education

In England since September 2010, all three and four year olds are entitled to 15 hours of free nursery education for 38 weeks of the year. Early Years education takes place in a variety of settings including state nursery schools, nursery classes and reception classes within primary schools, as well as settings outside the state sector such as voluntary pre-schools, privately run nurseries or childminders. In recent years there has been a major expansion of Early Years education and childcare. The Foundation Stage which was first introduced in September 2000, and covered children's education from the age of 3 to the end of the reception year, when children are aged 5. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) came into force in September 2008, and is a single regulatory and quality framework for the provision of learning, development and care for children in all registered early years settings between birth and the academic year in which they turn 5. The EYFS Profile (EYFSP) is the statutory assessment of each child's development and learning achievements at the end of the academic year in which they turn 5.

In Wales, children are entitled to a free part-time place the term following a child's third birthday until they enter statutory education. These places can be in a maintained school or a non-maintained setting such as a voluntary playgroup, private nursery or childminder which is approved to provide education. The Foundation Phase is a holistic developmental curriculum for 3 to 7-year-olds based on the needs of the individual child to meet their stage of development. Statutory rollout of the Foundation Phase framework started in September 2008 and the process was completed in the 2011/12 school year.

The commitment in the Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Government is to 'ensure that at least one year of pre-school education is available to every family that wants it.' Funded pre-school places are available in statutory nursery schools and units and in those voluntary and private settings participating in the Pre-School Education Programme (PSEP). Places in the voluntary/private sector are part-time whilst, in the statutory nursery sector, both full-time and part-time places are available. Pre-school education is designed for children in the year immediately before they enter Primary 1. Taking into account the starting age for compulsory education in Northern Ireland this means children are aged between 3 years 2 months and 4 years 2 months in the September in which they enter their final pre-school year. The Programme incorporates a number of features designed to promote high quality pre-school education provision in all settings including a curriculum which is common to all those involved in pre-school education

In Scotland, nationally funded learning provision typically starts with pre-school. Local authorities have a duty to secure a part-time funded place for every child starting, broadly speaking, from the beginning of the school term after the child's third birthday. Pre-school education can be provided by local authority centres, or private and voluntary providers under a partnership arrangement. In Scotland, early years education is called ante-pre-school education for those who start receiving their pre-school education in the academic year after their 3rd birthday until the end of that academic year, and pre-school education for the year prior to their starting primary school. As the current statutory starting age for pre-school is the first term after the 3rd birthday, this broadly means children have access to ante- and pre-school over 5 or 6 terms. For the youngest children in the cohort (born in January and February), who would stand to receive less than this, parents can also choose to defer entry to primary school, and local authorities are required to provide an additional year of pre-school education. For children with birthdays between September and December, parents may request a deferment but it is at the discretion of local authorities to reach a decision on a case by case basis.

Primary

In England, all schools are legally required to provide a broad and balanced curriculum, and all maintained schools must teach the national curriculum for 5 – 16 year olds.

The primary stage covers three age ranges: nursery (under 5), infant (5 to 7 or 8) (key stage 1) and junior (up to 11 or 12) (key stage 2) but in Northern Ireland there is generally no distinction between infant and junior schools. In Wales, although the types of school are the same, the Foundation Phase has brought together what was previously known as the Early Years (from 3 to 5-year-olds) and key stage 1 (from 5 to 7-year-olds) of the national curriculum to create one phase of education for children aged between three and seven. In Scotland, learning in primary schools (ages 5-11 in general) is part of the broad general education phase of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), a coherent curriculum from 3-18. In England, primary schools generally cater for 4-11 year olds. Some primary schools may have a nursery or a children's centre attached to cater for younger children. Most public sector primary schools take both boys and girls in mixed classes. It is usual to transfer straight to secondary school at age 11 (in England, Wales and Northern Ireland) or 12 (in Scotland), but in England some children make the transition via middle schools catering for various age ranges between 8 and 14. Depending on their individual age ranges middle schools are classified as either primary or secondary. In England, the first primary academies (publicly funded state schools that are independent of local authorities) opened in September 2010. In Wales, middle schools are a separate sector as they have pupils from nursery to the end of secondary years.

The major goals of primary education are achieving basic literacy and numeracy amongst all pupils, as well as establishing foundations in science, mathematics and other subjects. Children in England and Northern Ireland are assessed at the end of key stage 1 and key stage 2. In Wales, all learners in their final year of Foundation Phase and key stage 2 must be assessed through teacher assessments. In Scotland, primary features learning across 8 curriculum areas, as well as a strong focus on the development of literacy and numeracy skills and health and wellbeing. Teachers will use a range of assessment methods to monitor learners' progress, and a pupil profile will be produced at P7 offering a summary statement of a learners' best achievements, skills and knowledge.

Secondary

In England, public provision of secondary education in an area may consist of a combination of different types of school, the pattern reflecting historical circumstance and the policy adopted by the local authority. Comprehensive schools largely admit pupils without reference to ability or aptitude and cater for all the children in a neighbourhood, but in some areas they co-exist with other types of schools, for example grammar schools. Academies, operating in England, are publicly funded independent schools. Academies benefit from greater freedoms to help innovate and raise standards. These include freedom from local authority control, the ability to set their own pay and conditions for staff, freedom around the delivery of the curriculum and the ability to change the lengths of terms and school days. The first academies opened in 2002 with the objective of replacing poorly performing schools. Academies were established and driven by external sponsors, to achieve a transformation in education performance. The academies programme was expanded through legislation in the Academies Act 2010. This enables all maintained primary, secondary and special schools to apply to become an academy. Schools that are performing well are able to become academies without a sponsor. The first of these academies opened in September 2010 and are expected to work with underperforming schools to help raise standards. Other schools can become academies if they join an academy trust with an excellent school or an education partner with a strong record of improvement. Sponsored academies remain an essential part of the government's drive to raise standards and improve education opportunities for all pupils.

Free schools were introduced by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition following the 2010 general election as an extension of the academies programme making it possible for parents, teachers, charities and businesses to set up their new schools provided there is demand from parents for them to do so. The first free schools opened in September 2011 and about a third are secondary schools.

University technical colleges are 14-19 institutions that provide a technical education alongside GCSEs. They are employer and university led and these sponsors design the curriculum and specialisms, provide mentoring and working experience opportunities to equip the students with the skills that employers demand.

Studio schools also offer academic and vocational qualifications which are taught in a practical and project-based way. Study is combined with work placements with local and national employers who are involved in the school. The distinction between studio schools and other 14-19 provision is that they have a strong emphasis on practical work and enterprise. Though studio schools may have a 'specialism', they will focus mainly on equipping students with a wide range of employability skills and a core of academic qualifications.

In Wales, secondary schools take pupils at 11 years old until statutory school age and beyond. Secondary education is also provided in middle schools and some special schools, Pupil Referral Units and Independent schools. All are maintained by the local authorities with the exception of Independent schools.

In Northern Ireland, post-primary education consists of 5 compulsory years and two further years if students wish to remain in school to pursue post GCSE / Level 2 courses to Level 3. Ministerial policy is that transfer from primary school should be on the basis of non-academic criteria, however legally post primary schools can still admit pupils based on academic performance.

Education authority secondary schools in Scotland are comprehensive in character and offer six years of secondary education, with compulsory age being 16 (S4); however, in some remote areas there are several schools which cover only some of these six years, with primary provision also sometimes offered within the same establishment. The broad general education phase of CfE is up to the end of S3, providing a strong grounding for a move to study for qualifications in the senior phase (S4-S6). A second pupil profile is produced at the end of S3.

At the end of this stage of education, pupils are normally entered for a range of external examinations. Most frequently, these are GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. In Scotland pupils study for their first National Qualifications (NQ), typically at SCQF level 3 to 5, in the fourth year of secondary school. These include Access 3, National 3 to National 5 or Intermediates 1 and 2. NQ Higher grade (SCQF level 6), requires at least a further year of secondary schooling. Although Intermediates 1 and 2 can be taken in the fourth year of secondary school, they are designed primarily for candidates in the fifth and sixth years of secondary school. Scotland's qualifications system is currently undergoing a period of change. The new National 1 to National 5 qualifications were introduced in Scottish schools for the first time this year (2013/14). Intermediate 1 and 2 qualifications will remain available until 2015/16. Higher and Advanced Higher qualifications will be retained and refreshed, with the new refreshed qualifications available from 2014/15 and 2015/16 respectively.

Further Education

Further education may be used in a general sense to cover all non-advanced courses taken after the period of compulsory education. It is post-compulsory education (in addition to that received at secondary school), that is distinct from the education offered in universities (higher education). It may be at any level from basic skills training to higher vocational education such as City and Guilds or Foundation Degree.

A distinction is usually made between FE and higher education (HE). HE is education at a higher level than secondary school. This is usually provided in distinct institutions such as universities. FE in the United Kingdom therefore includes education for people over 16, usually excluding universities. It is primarily taught in FE colleges, work-based learning, and adult and community learning institutions. This includes post-16 courses similar to those taught at schools and sub-degree courses similar to those taught at higher education (HE) colleges (which also teach degree-level courses) and at some universities.

Colleges in England that are regarded as part of the FE sector include General FE (GFE) and tertiary colleges, Sixth form colleges, Specialist colleges (mainly colleges of agriculture and horticulture and colleges of drama and dance) and Adult education institutes.

In addition, FE courses may be offered in the school sector, both in sixth form (16-19) schools, or, more commonly, sixth forms within secondary schools. Since April 2012, it has been possible to establish academies for 16-19 year olds.

In England, further education is often seen as forming one part of a wider learning and skills sector, alongside workplace education, prison education, and other types of non-school, non-university education and training. Since June 2009, the sector is overseen by the new Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, although some parts (such as education and training for 14-19 year olds) fall within the remit of the Department for Education.

AS (Advanced Subsidiary) and A (Advanced) level qualifications are the traditional academic qualifications offered by schools and colleges. Many students take AS and A level qualifications in years 12 and 13 after completing their GCSEs, though adults can take them too. Students can choose from a wide range of academic subjects, as well as some work-related subjects. The primary purpose of A levels is to prepare students for degree-level study; over 80% of students with 2 or more A levels go on to higher education. The A level normally takes two years to complete full-time, although they're also available to study part-time.

A levels are made up of the AS level and the A2. Each part makes up 50 per cent of the overall A level grade. The AS level is taken at the end of the first year of an A level course and can be either a free standing qualification in its own right, or make up the first half of a full A level. At the end of the AS year, students can choose to continue to the second year to complete the full A level or not. In year two of a full A level, students take the A2 which is designed to deepen the knowledge gained during the AS level.

On 22 January 2013, the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, announced plans to introduce changes to A level so that in future A levels will be linear with all assessment at the end of two years. He also announced that universities would lead the review of A levels to ensure that the qualification provides students with the knowledge and skills they need to begin undergraduate study.

The reforms will give students a better experience of post-16 study, ensuring that students are studying rigorous qualifications that provide them with the right skills and knowledge to enable them to progress to university and employment. The first new linear A levels are expected to be in schools for September 2014, ready for first teaching in September 2015. It is likely that A levels requiring more substantial changes and input from universities will be in schools for September 2015, ready for first teaching in September 2016.

In Wales pupils may take A levels or other level 3 qualifications in a number of different types of educational setting e.g. school sixth forms, further education colleges, adult and community education centre or through work based learning. The data for Wales only includes school sixth forms.

In Northern Ireland many pupils who remain in education post 16 remain in schools studying towards A –Level qualifications, and other equivalent qualifications listed in the entitlement framework or in Further Education Colleges, studying a range of level 2 and level 3 qualifications. 170 of 216 post primary schools in Northern Ireland had pupils in the final year of an A –Level or equivalent course of study in the 2011/12 academic year. The data for Northern Ireland only includes pupils in schools.

In Scotland pupils tend to study Highers (SCQF level 6) in their fifth year at secondary school, and in sixth year they may study more Highers and/or Advanced Highers (SCQF level 7). They are aimed at those who have passed courses at SCQF level 5 (Standard Grade Credit, Intermediate 2 or National 5). Adults may also study Highers at college without needing previous qualifications. Higher qualifications are usually necessary for entering university.

Higher Education

Higher education is defined as courses that are of a standard that is higher than GCE A level, the Higher Grade of the SCE/National Qualification, GNVQ/NVQ level 3 or the Edexcel (formerly BTEC) or SQA National Certificate/Diploma. There are three main levels of HE course:

1. Postgraduate courses leading to higher degrees, diplomas and certificates (including Doctorate, Masters (research and taught), Postgraduate diplomas and certificates as well as postgraduate certificates of education (PGCE) and professional qualifications) which usually require a first degree as entry qualification.
2. Undergraduate courses which include first degrees (honours and ordinary), first degrees with qualified teacher status, enhanced first degrees, first degrees obtained concurrently with a diploma, and intercalated first degrees (where first degree students, usually in medicine, dentistry or veterinary medicine, interrupt their studies to complete a one-year course of advanced studies in a related topic).
3. Other undergraduate courses which include all other higher education courses, for example SVQ or NVQ: Level 5, Diploma (HNC/D level for diploma and degree holders), HND (or equivalent), HNC (or equivalent) and SVQ or NVQ: Level 4 and Diplomas in HE.

As a result of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, former polytechnics and some other HEIs were designated as universities in 1992/93. Students normally attend HE courses at HEIs, but some attend at FE colleges.

General queries

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