

Pre-university education and qualifications

Education in the UK

By law, all children in the UK of compulsory school age must receive a full-time education. Approximately 8.5 million children attend one of the 30,000 schools in England and Wales; 830,000 children attend about 5,000 schools in Scotland, including pre-schools and other special education schools; and Northern Ireland sends 350,000 children to 1,300 state schools. More than 90 percent of pupils attend publicly funded state schools.

Education in the UK is divided into primary, secondary, further and higher education. Statutory schooling ages are between five to 16 years and compulsory education lasts for approximately 11 years. Children are legally required to start attending school at the start of the term after their fifth birthday either on 31 August, 31 December or 31 March. However, children often start earlier than this. Pupils are required to stay in school until the last Friday in June of the school year in which they reach 16 years of age. During this time children must receive full-time education that is suited to their age, ability, aptitude and special educational needs (SEN). If a child does not attend school, the local authority (LA) must be satisfied that other appropriate provision is available.

Primary (or elementary) education begins when children are four to seven years of age. Secondary education in the UK normally starts for most students at the age of 11 years old and generally refers to the years of formal education leading up to the legal school leaving age of 16. There are, however, in some parts of the UK middle schools, which run up to 12 or 13 years old.

Further education (FE) - including career-based courses and some degree courses - is the term used to describe education and training that takes place after the legal school-leaving age and preceding potential entry into a university or college of higher education. All state school teaching and learning in the UK is underpinned by the National Curriculum.

The National Curriculum

In 1992, the UK introduced a National Curriculum and all state schools are required to teach to it until students reach the age of 16. Private or 'independent' schools are, however, not obliged to do so.

The National Curriculum defines four 'key stages' of educational development in the UK. Primary schools usually cover stages 1 and 2 and secondary schools cover stages 3 and 4.

- Key stage 1: up to age seven (Years 1 and 2).
- Key stage 2: age seven to 11 (Years 3, 4, 5 and 6).
- Key stage 3: age 11 to 14 (Years 7, 8 and 9).
- Key stage 4: age 14 to 16 (Years 10 and 11 - preparation for academic and equivalent vocational qualifications).

National Curriculum core subjects are: English, mathematics and science. Foundation subjects are design and technology; information and communication technology; history; geography; modern foreign languages; music; art and design; physical education; religious education; and citizenship. Northern Ireland follows a similar framework. Schools can, however, develop additional curriculum elements to meet pupils' individual needs and circumstances. For example, Welsh and Irish languages are core subjects in Welsh and Irish-speaking schools.

Pupils are assessed by National Curriculum tests at the end of each Key Stage. Key Stage 1 assessments are taken at age seven, Key Stage 2 assessments are taken at age 11 and Key Stage 3 assessments are taken at age 14. Key Stage 4 is assessed by levels of achievement acquired at General Certificate of

Secondary Education (GCSE) level. Having completed GCSEs, pupils then have a choice of whether to continue with further education at school or college or to undertake employment.

Primary schools in England and Wales

It is compulsory for children in the UK to receive primary education; although there are situations and specific circumstances where it is permissible for parents to provide it. All state primary schools in the UK are co-educational, free and attended by over 4 million children.

The term 'Primary Schools' encompasses Infant Schools (for children ages five to seven); Junior Schools (ages seven to 11); First Schools (usually ages five to eight); and, in some cases, Middle Schools (usually ages eight to 13). Children start school either in the year or the term in which they reach five years of age depending upon the policy of the Local Education Authority. All state schools are obliged to follow the centralised National Curriculum defined above. Primary school years are therefore split into Key Stages. At the end of Key Stage 2 in Year 6 all children in state primary schools are required to take National Curriculum tests in reading, writing, mathematics and science. All schools are under the jurisdiction of the Department for Children, Schools and Families and are required to receive regular inspections by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). Private schools are inspected by the Independent Schools Inspectorate.

Secondary schools in England and Wales

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 eight or nine years, then onto secondary education at age 12 or 13 years. Most secondary schools in England and Wales are comprehensive; and these schools do not operate a selective entrance system. However, in some parts of England, a grammar school system also operates whereby pupils are usually required to pass an entrance examination, based on their ability.

From the age of 11-14 years, secondary school pupils study a broad range of subjects, such as music, maths, sciences (either combined or separately as biology, chemistry and physics) and english. They will then take an additional four or five subjects in addition to these, which are normally selected by the individual pupil from a range including, french, german, business studies, design and technology, music, sports science, geography, history and many others.

When they reach 14 years, pupils usually start the first year of a two-year process leading to examinations in the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSEs). The GCSE is a single-subject examination set and marked by independent examination boards. Pupils usually take up to 10 (there is no upper or lower limit) GCSE examinations in different subjects, including mathematics and English language. After taking GCSEs, at the age of 16 years, pupils may choose to leave secondary schooling.

From 2008 it is also possible for 14-19 year olds to study for a Diploma. This is a new qualification in England designed to provide young people with the skills and knowledge needed for work. Diplomas are not being launched in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. There will be 14 Diplomas in total by September 2010.

In Wales it is possible to study for the Welsh Baccalaureate. The qualification is available for 14 to 19 year old students and combines personal development skills with existing qualifications such as A-levels, NVQs and GCSEs to make one wider award that is valued by employers and universities. The Welsh Assembly Government introduced the Welsh Baccalaureate to transform learning for young people in Wales. It gives broader experiences than traditional learning programmes, to suit the diverse needs of young people. It can be studied in English or Welsh, or a combination of the two languages. More information about the qualification can be found on [the Welsh Baccalaureate website](#).

If young people wish to continue their education, after an additional one year of study, at the age of 17 years, pupils may take a higher level of secondary school examinations known as AS-Levels. These qualifications

are the equivalent of 50 percent of Advanced level (A-level) examinations, which may be taken two years after GCSEs and are required for university entrance in the UK. At both AS and A level, course work accounts for between 20 and 30 percent of the marks, with the remainder being assessed by examination. A levels are usually studied at:

- Secondary schools, with additional '6th form' facilities.
- Separate Sixth Form colleges.
- Colleges of tertiary (third level) education.

Alternatively, pupils might continue their education at a vocational or technical college of further education. Finally, the Cambridge Pre-U was launched in September 2008. It is a two-year programme designed for 16-18 year olds and aims to provide them with the skills required to make a success of their subsequent studies at university. In the region of 50 schools are currently delivering the Cambridge Pre-U and more than 100 plan to deliver the diploma over the next 2-3 years. The Pre-U certificate is available as a free standing qualification in 26 subject areas and can be taken alongside A levels or other level 3 qualifications. Various institutions across the UK will accept the Cambridge Pre-U certificate as an alternative to A levels.

Exam boards in the UK

There are a number of exam boards in the UK with the following three being the main ones:

AQA - The AQA provide a broad range of qualifications of the highest quality for 14-19 year olds. Their qualifications are designed for the needs and interests of all learners. Please [visit the AQA website](#) for more information.

OCR - OCR is a leading UK awarding body, providing a wide range of qualifications to meet the needs of learners of all ages and abilities. More than 10,000 schools and colleges actively deliver their qualifications. Qualifications fall broadly into two categories - general and vocational. They are divided into different levels. Please [visit the OCR website](#) for more information.

Edexcel - Edexcel offer a range of qualifications from BTECs and GCSEs to Work-based Learning. Please [visit the Edexcel website](#) for more information.

Primary and secondary schools in Scotland

Children start primary school in Scotland aged between four and a half and five and a half depending on when the child's birthday falls. Children born between March and August start school at five years old and those born between September and February start school at age four-and-a-half. The Scottish system is the most flexible in the UK, as parents of children born between September and February can opt to hold their child back a year and let them start school when they are five-and-a-half.

Pupils remain at primary school for seven years completing Primary One to Seven. Then aged 11 or 12, they start secondary school for a compulsory four years. In Scotland, school pupils sit Standard Grade exams at the age of 15/16, sometimes earlier, for up to eight subjects including compulsory exams in English, mathematics, a foreign language, a science subject and a social subject. Pupils may then spend a further year studying for Higher Grades (also known as 'Highers') in four or five subjects.

Pupils who pass their Highers at the age of 17 can go on to study at university. However, they usually choose to stay at school or college for another year, to study for more Highers or for subjects in which they are particularly interested (Advanced Highers). This system means that pupils in Scotland often leave school or college with a broad knowledge of a wide range of subjects.

Interestingly, it is now required by the [Scottish Parliament](#) for children to have two hours of physical education a week as part of their school curriculum, although each school may vary these compulsory combinations.

The differences between private and state schools in the UK

There are more than 2,500 private or independent schools in the UK, educating approximately 615,000 children. Such schools rely for all of their funding upon private sources. Some independent schools also claim charity status that acts as a subsidy to their income. Many private schools have long traditions, and historical buildings. Several are up to 600 years old.

Many independent schools are either full or partial boarding schools. This means the pupils 'live in' at their school, and do not return home at the end of the school day (fees and costs may be as high as £28,000 a year for boarding pupils).

Private, independent schools are free to select their pupils according to their own judgements (subject to UK laws against various forms of discrimination). The academic ability of applicants and the financial status of their parents are usually two key selection criteria. Some private schools offer scholarships to attract particularly intelligent pupils and award means-tested bursaries on a competitive basis. Parents often make considerable sacrifices to be able to send their children to private schools. Reasons vary, but generally private education is seen to be to a very high standard academically - it is not uncommon for students to take as many as 11 or 12 GCSEs - and to offer cultural, social and professional advantages, as well as a wide range of sporting, musical and artistic facilities.

Overall, independent schools are characterised by a broader, more traditional, approach to education (than that prescribed by the National Curriculum) which is facilitated by low pupil-teacher ratios, more individual teaching and a greater emphasis on the development of personal attributes and abilities.

School rules can be more easily enforced when a boarding pupil is subject to school discipline 24 hours a day. Unlike state schools, a child may be expelled under the school's statutes, at the discretion of the Headteacher. The most usual reasons for expulsion involve some rejection of the school's values, such as drug-taking, extreme dishonesty or violence. Pupils not expected to qualify for university might be asked to leave before the sixth form.

In England and Wales there are no specific requirements for teaching staff in independent schools to have Qualified Teacher Status, or to be registered with the General Teaching Council. In Scotland, a teaching qualification and registration with the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) is, however, mandatory for all teaching positions. Teachers in private schools are traditionally well-qualified both academically and socially to do their job.

'Public schools' is a name often given to independent, private schools in England and Wales. In Scotland and Ireland it is not a commonly used term, because in those countries 'public schools' often means 'state schools'.

Further education institutions

As indicated above, education in the UK is divided into primary, secondary, further and higher education. Further education usually refers to education achieved after GCSEs and undertaken at an institution funded to deliver a range of qualifications which may potentially link directly to, or overlap with, courses in higher education. Further education institutions include sixth form colleges; tertiary colleges and colleges of further education.

While A-levels are the most widely accepted UK qualifications for entry to a university, there are many other relevant further education qualifications which students may achieve before they begin their higher education experience. These are listed below.

BTEC National Award, Certificate or Diploma



BTEC Nationals are one or two-year courses in career-related subjects such as e-business, engineering, art and design, media, performing arts, agriculture, applied science, computing and health and social care.

They are ideal for students hoping to progress to a career at supervisory or technician level, and also provide a foundation for higher education courses in the same subject area.

Higher National Certificate (HNC) or Diploma (HND)

Higher National Certificates and Diplomas are one and two-year career-related further/higher education courses, which are equivalent to the first stages of a degree. They are available in many areas including engineering, sports studies, art and design, media and communications and music technology. Successful completion allows students to 'top-up' to a degree by transferring into the second or third year of the degree course.

International Baccalaureate (IB)

Some UK institutions also offer two-year courses leading to the international qualification known as the International Baccalaureate (IB), that is recognised for admission to undergraduate study.

Further information

The Qualification and Curriculum Authority (QCA) maintains and develops the National Curriculum and associated assessments, tests and examinations, and accredits and monitors qualifications in colleges and at work. Further details can be found on the QCA website.

You can find a list of all UK qualifications accredited by the QCA on the Open Qualifications website. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) ensures that UK higher education is of a standard that's respected and admired across the world.

Education in the United Kingdom. Wikipedia.

British Council

UK government website

More specific information about pre-university institutions is available from the website addresses of particular schools or colleges.