

## **THE UK EDUCATION CURRICULUM:**

### **INTRODUCTION:**

The United Kingdom or UK (essentially Britain) includes England, Scotland and Wales, and Northern Ireland. In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland there has been, in recent years, some independent government. And that independence affects the education systems (but not 'important' departments like defence!). So Scotland runs a slightly separate education system. Wales does too, in some respects. And so does Northern Ireland. But this document should give you a very clear and reliable overview of how the system operates in England, and much of it is still relevant elsewhere within the UK.

Education is free and compulsory for all 5-16 year olds. Your children can attend schools as long as they are in Britain as your dependents. Education is compulsory, but school is not, because children can be educated at home.

### **PRE-SCHOOL (NURSERY) EDUCATION:**

Each child may have up to 6 terms of free nursery education before they start school age (the term after their 5th birthday). If you pass the assessment a Nursery Education Grant pays for 5 x 2½ hour sessions a week starting the term after the child's 3rd birthday. A child will usually receive nursery education for 33 weeks a year divided into 3 x 11-week terms.

The child can attend any of these facilities:

- Nursery attached to a school
- Nursery school
- Pre-school group
- Day nursery
- Independent or private nursery school
- Approved childminder network

Some nursery have breakfast clubs, lunch clubs, extra sessions and after school clubs, but none of these are paid for by the Nursery Education Grant.

There are also usually Toddlers groups and Play Groups that take children from about 2 years old. Parents have to pay a small amount per session for these.

The average cost of full-time day care is £150 a week per child. It could be more depending on the age of the child.

### **KEY STAGES:**

Under the National curriculum there are four Key Stages:

- Key Stage 1: 5 to 7 years old
- Key Stage 2: 7 to 11 years old
- Key Stage 3: 11 to 14 years old
- Key Stage 4: 14 to 16 years old

### **The PRIMARY YEARS (YEAR 1 – YEAR 6):**

Children in the UK usually start school during the September after their 4<sup>th</sup> birthday. They may change school when they are 7, and usually remain in primary schools until the September after their 11<sup>th</sup> birthday.

There are three 'core' subjects in the National Curriculum – English, Maths and Science. Maths & English are tested at Key Stage 1, with Science being added at Key Stage 2 at the end of the Primary cycle. In addition children are taught History, Geography, Technology, Art, Music and Physical Education, Design Technology (DT), Information and Communication Technology (ICT), and Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE). In every school there is a program of Religious Education (RE), which teaches children about key world religions – but parents can take children out of these classes. Many primary schools also teach a modern foreign language.

Children are tested using national tests (called SATS) when they are 7 and again when they are 11.

## **SECONDARY EDUCATION (YEAR 7 – YEAR 13):**

### **YEARS 7 – 9:**

Children continue to be taught the same subjects as in the Primary years, with the addition of at least one foreign language. In Britain this is normally French (though by no means always). Welsh is taught in some British schools. German is popular. Science may be taught as an integrated subject or as three subjects (Chemistry, Physics, Biology) depending upon the school's policy.

### **YEARS 10 – 11:**

This is a two-year cycle in which students prepare for the GCSE (general Certificate in Secondary Education) examinations. These are important for university entrance as well as for employment. Success in at least 5 subjects is usually required for eventual entrance to a British university and also for universities in other countries, since the British system is recognised in most countries throughout the world. The level of achievement in GCSE is the normal indicator of a student's capacity to study at A (Advanced) Level. Many international schools take IGCSE (International GCSE) rather than the normal British GCSE. This is administered by the Cambridge University board (UCLES) and is fully recognised as equal to the standard GCSE.

At this stage students will normally study up to 9 subjects, although in international schools the number of subjects taken may depend, for example, on a student's ability in English or a lack of background in certain subjects. This means that students have a limited amount of choice of which subjects they will continue to study; they may often be able to start a new subject as well e.g. another foreign language.

At Key Stage 3 the following 15 subjects are compulsory: English, Maths, Science, History, Geography, Art, DT, Music, ICT, PE, Citizenship, RE, Modern Foreign Language (MFL), Sex Education, Careers Education. PSHE is not compulsory.

At Key Stage 4 the following 10 subjects are compulsory: English, Maths, Science, ICT, PE, Citizenship, RE, Sex Education, Careers Education and Work-Related Learning. The Arts, Design and Technology, the Humanities and Modern Foreign Languages are entitlement areas at Key Stage 4. This means schools must make courses available to all students who wish to study them. All schools must provide RE for all pupils so they can learn about and from the 6 main religions in the UK, although parents can choose to withdraw their children from this subject.

The results of GCSE examinations are graded, from A-G. The 'pass grades', acceptable to universities and employers, are A\*, A, B and C.

### **YEARS 12-13:**

GCSEs are based on the national curriculum. There is a seven point grading scale from A, the highest grade, to G. There is also an A\* grade for outstanding papers.

Following successful results in the GCSE examinations, students wishing to go on to university or other institutions of higher education will take A Levels (or, in a number of international schools, the International Baccalaureate (IB) – see below). This is another two-year cycle and is highly specialised, which is why first-degree university courses in the UK are of only 3 or 4 years' duration.

Students will normally study 3 subjects for A Level, though they may study for a fourth A Level, or perhaps an additional subsidiary level course (known as AS). The choice of subjects depends upon a student's likely course at university, and likely future career. For example, a student wishing to study Engineering will have to study Physics and Maths and one other subject; for Medicine, Chemistry is obligatory, normally with two other subjects out of Biology, Maths and Physics. A number of other courses, however, have wide flexibility in subject choices – for example, Law, Economics, and Business Studies. The school's Counsellor/Careers Advisor will usually help students and parents with the best choice of subjects and procedures for university entrance.

Acceptance at a British university will depend upon the results gained at A Level (and also take into account success at GCSE). Pass grades at A Level are A, B, C, D and E. Fail grades are N and U. The level of pass grades required will depend upon the demand for places at different faculties and universities. The most difficult universities to enter are normally Oxford and Cambridge, while the most difficult faculties will usually be Medicine, Veterinary Science, Dentistry and Law. Because of the effect of supply and demand, some students may well fail to gain entrance with pass grades in 3 subjects of B, C and C, whilst others applying for lower demand subjects will easily be accepted with such grades.

International students transferring at a late stage to a British school (for example at the A Level stage, but not having taken the GCSE exams) should not be too concerned. British universities are flexible in their demands, especially with international students, and will offer places on the school's recommendation and likely results in their A Level or IB examinations.

Universities in other countries are normally acquainted with the British system, and will apply similar criteria to universities in the UK.

When they are 16 years old pupils may either leave school to start a job, or continue their education. Those pupils who want to continue their education can either go to a further education college for vocational courses or stay on in the sixth form of the secondary school. In either place they can take Advanced-level examinations (A levels) after two-year courses in three or four subjects. A levels are used to select students for university places. They are graded on a seven-point scale from A to E with N as a narrow failure and U as unclassified. The Advanced Supplementary level (AS-level), corresponds to about half an A-level course and is graded A to E.

### **The INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE (IB):**

IB is similar to A Levels in that it is a final two-year course for entry to university. It is administered by the International Baccalaureate Office based in Geneva. There are currently something like 70 state and private schools and (sixth form) colleges in the UK which offer the IB. It is well established and is

acceptable for UK university entrance as is A Level. It is also recognised by most countries throughout the world. Indeed, Education Ministries in some countries prefer it to the A Level system since, although similar in the level of achievement required, it is broader based, requiring six academic subjects to be studied.

### A BROAD GUIDE to the EXAMINATION YEAR:

Year in School	Key Stage	Tests Taken	Time Taken	Purpose
1 – 3	1	S.A.T (Standard Attainment Test) English, Maths & Science only	Mid May Year 3	To assess student progress against national set of norms. Average anticipated grade level
4 – 6	2	S.A.T English, Maths & Science only	Mid May Year 6	As above Average anticipated grade level
7 – 9	3	S.A.T English, Maths & Science only	Mid May Year 9	As above Average anticipated grade level 6
10 – 11	4	G.C.S.E	Mid May – End June	To demonstrate final cumulative level of attainment in subject chosen to be studied in depth during year 10 & 11. Can be taken in year 10 by able students. Up to 12 studied. Marked A-G A-C considered 'good' passes. D-G considered a pass. U ungraded – fail. Assessment – coursework & exam.
		G.N.V.Q General National Vocational Qualification	"	Can only be taken in subjects that have an alliance to a vocational activity e.g. Leisure & Tourism, Sports & Recreation, Catering & Hospitality, Health & Social Care. Marking as above.
2 – 13	5	A.S. Level  'A' Level	"	Half way between G.C.S.E and 'A' level. Number studied 4/5/6. Anticipate dropping. 1 & 2 (depending on start number) to concentrate on completing smaller number at higher 'A' level. Highest school based qualification. Entry into Higher Education depends on grades and overall points score. Number studied 3 & 4.
11		G.N.V.Q N.V.Q		As in Year 10 & 11. Seen as the vocational equivalent to 3 'A' levels. Again as for G.N.V.Q available only in selected vocational areas.

### CONCLUSION:

The above description is by no means comprehensive in detail, but is intended to be a basic guide to the British educational system for those not familiar with it. It should also be added that changes in the A Level system are envisaged for the future: for example, a new style of advance course which

complements or which can replace A Level, known by the letter GNVQ (General National Vocational Qualification), is becoming popular. However, parents seeking a place at a British international school for their children will understand the essential structure from the description given above. They will always be able to find out more details from the schools which they visit or which their children are currently attending.