



Heywood de Ferrer

Associates

A Guide to School
Education in
England and Wales

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Introduction

The British education system is unlike any other. With a myriad of options and choices available at every step of the school journey it can feel utterly overwhelming for anyone. For parents who have been educated in Britain, you may be surprised by how much it has changed over the last 30 years - while parents educated internationally may find our schools to be somewhat of a complex maze.

Key facts:

- School years start in September
- Major exams are GCSEs and A Levels
- Compulsory schooling in Britain is from 5 to 16

Heywood de Ferrer Associates offer specialist help for your child and their education.

- Mediation between parents and schools when there is an impasse and to avoid costly court cases;
- Support for parents, students and families when things go wrong;
- Truly independent advice on any aspect of your child's education or well-being;
- Advocacy for your child when you are not available or even when you are;
- Help to match your child to the school that is right for them to thrive;
- A source of information for answers and advice on all educational questions.

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Ages

Starting school

Although schooling is technically compulsory from the age of 5, most children start school in the year they turn 5, which is known as Reception. If your child is born between April 1 and August 31 you can ask for them to be held back a year. If they are born outside of this window, but you feel they would struggle to start school at the normal time, you can appeal to your local council to allow them to start a year later.

Many schools actually have two entry dates for Reception, meaning some children start in the September and others part-way through the year when they are more able to cope.

Finishing school

Young people aged 16-18 do not have to be in school, but they do have to be in some form of education or on an approved training scheme.

Year groups

Reception - aged 4-5
Year 1 - aged 5-6
Year 2 - aged 6-7
Year 3 - aged 7-8
Year 4 - aged 8-9
Year 5 - aged 9-10
Year 6 - aged 10-11 (KS2 SATs)
Year 7 - aged 11-12
Year 8 - aged 12-13
Year 9 - aged 13-14
Year 10 - aged 14-15 (GCSEs)
Year 11 - aged 15-16 (GCSEs)
Year 12 - aged 16-17 (A Levels)
Year 13 - aged 17-18 (A Levels)

Almost all state schools will use these names for year groups, but many private schools have their own terminology. This is covered more in the private education section.

Key stages

The different school years are divided into 'Key Stages' (KS). These are nationwide, governmental terms, but not every school will refer to these stages.

Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) - also known as Early Years, this covers any educational establishment which provides childcare or teaching from birth to 5-years-old. The final year of EYFS is as Reception. During this period children have to cover key areas of learning and development. These include emotional, physical and language development, as well as basic literacy, mathematics, and arts.

Key Stage 1 - this is for children aged 5-7 and covers year 1 and 2. During KS1 pupils begin to have a wider variety of lessons, usually encompassing humanities and sciences, as well as maths

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and English. Across these two years most children will be taught number bonds, times tables, and move onto reading books. At the end of KS1 children at most schools take standardised tests (SATs) in English and Maths. These tests are being scrapped as of 2023. Children are generally taught by one teacher for almost every subject.

Key Stage 2 - this is a three-year period, from ages 7-11, covering years 3-6. This is the final part of primary education, so children move onto more defined lessons, usually factoring in languages and ICT. Children at most schools take another round of SATs in English and Maths in their final year of KS2. Pupils are generally taught by one teacher for the majority of subjects, but as they get older they will start to be taught more by subject specialists.

Key Stage 3 - this is another three-year period, from ages 11-14, covering years 7-9. This is the first part of secondary education, although not every child will move to a new school at the start of KS3. Students will now have a different teacher (and usually a different classroom) for every subject. KS3 tends to be when students are taught the biggest range of subjects, in anticipation of subject specialism as they move to the final two stages. Some schools may start KS4 teaching in year 9.

Key Stage 4 - this is a two-year period, from ages 14-16, covering years 10-11. This is when students take their GCSEs. There is huge variance in what different schools offer and how they structure these two years, as well as a great deal of recent change from the government and national curriculum. More information on statutory exams is in the examination section.

Key Stage 5 - this is the final stage of education, from ages 16-18, covering years 12-13 - also known as Sixth Form. Most students take A Level exams, but some may take other examinations like the International Baccalaureate or BTECs, while other students may forgo school in favour of an apprenticeship or vocational training.

The Key Stages are the usual points where parents may look to move a child to another school, as in the middle of a KS may negatively impact their educational attainment (particularly during KS4 and KS5).

School structures

Broadly schools are split into primary and secondary, with primary covering 4-11 and secondary 11-18. However, as with most aspects of British education, this varies massively depending on the area you live in and the type of school.

You may find yourself faced with lots of choice in terms of the structure of the schools in your area, or alternatively it may be that where you live is quite rigid and all schools work in the same way. Lots of parents may not be aware of the differences between sending their child to an infant school over a full primary school, which is why it is important to consider what you have available to you.

State structures

Primary schools

- Ages 4-11
- EYFS to KS2
- Reception to year 6

Secondary schools (with sixth form)

- Ages 11-18
- KS3 to KS5
- Year 7 to year 13

Infant schools

- Ages 4-7
- EYFS to KS1
- Reception to year 2

Secondary schools (without sixth form)

- Ages 11-16
- KS3 to KS4
- Year 7 to year 11

Junior schools

- Ages 7-11
- KS2 only
- Year 3 to year 6

Sixth form

- Ages 16-19*
- KS5
- Year 12-13

Middle schools

- Ages 9-13
- Most of KS2 and KS3
- Year 5 to year 8

**Many sixth forms allow students up to the age of 19, which is when education no longer has to be free. This allows students who need to repeat a year of sixth form to do so free of charge.*

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Private structures

Many private schools follow one of the models above, however there are lots (usually boarding and/or historically all-boys' schools) which work slightly differently.

Pre-prep

- Ages 4-7
- EYFS to KS1
- Reception to year 2

Prep

- Ages 7-13
- KS2 to KS3
- Year 3 to year 8

Senior

- Ages 13-18
- KS3 to KS5
- Year 9 to year 13

Girls only senior schools usually start from year 7 (age 11)

Many private schools have 'all-through' systems, whereby one school covers reception to year 13. Usually, although these schools are under one bracket, they are split across multiple sites similarly to the way shown above.

State & private

As with many other countries, the UK has both state-funded and privately-funded schools. Fee-paying schools could be £3,000 a year up to £40,000 a year, excluding extras.

There is an assumption that parents choose private schools because they achieve better academic results. While this is sometimes the case, it is not this black and white. Some private schools consistently produce higher results - often places with challenging admissions procedures - while others may not. Parents may choose private schools for a multitude of reasons, including: facilities, location, smaller class sizes, pastoral care, subject or teaching specialisms, or extracurricular opportunities.

Additionally, there can be an assumption that parents choose state schools because they cannot afford private education. This is often not the case, and instead parents may opt for state education for a range of other factors. State schools may suit children or their families because of: diversity of student body, location, subject specialisms, facilities, number of students (greater and smaller), or extracurricular opportunities.

One family may choose state for one child and private for another, or even private for one stage of a student's academic journey and state for a different stage. The reasons behind the choices are plentiful, vary due to on the schools on offer, and are entirely dependent on the child. There are a lot of assumptions - sometimes encouraged by the media - around the decision to state or privately educate a child, which are very simplistic.

Even within the individual state and private brackets, there are many subdivisions and probably many more school types than you realised. As with anything educational, your location will affect your choices, but many areas will still have plenty of options.

State schools

Every child has the right to free education between the ages of 4 and 19, and the schools which provide this education are known as 'state' schools.

In many other countries like the USA, Hong Kong, or Australia these schools might be called 'public' schools. In the UK 'public' schools are an elite group of boarding schools, which can often cause confusion.

The state sector has undergone a great deal of change over the past 15 years or so, with the introduction of academies.

The statutory limit for the number of students in a single class at state-funded schools is 30, however schools can have more if they appeal to the appropriate education authority. A recent study showed that 90% of children in state schools are taught in classes of 30 or fewer.

State schools now fall into two categories: maintained or academy. There are plenty of subcategories underneath that, but every state-funded school is one or the other.

Maintained schools

This is what the majority of schools used to be.

Maintained schools are state-funded, but run locally by the local authority (LA). These schools have to follow the national curriculum.

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Voluntary-aided and voluntary-controlled schools are types of maintained schools; they are usually religious.

Maintained schools can be primary or secondary.

Academies

This is what state-funded schools are increasingly becoming.

Originally academies were 'sponsor-led', which meant a private sponsor (like a business or a charity) would take over the running of failing schools. Academies started to be seen as code for 'failing school', which increases the confusion we have around them to this day.

Academies are now mainly 'converter' academies, which is when a school has voluntarily become an academy instead of a maintained school.

There are three main differences between academies and maintained schools:

1. Academies are separate from the local authority, meaning they report directly to the Department for Education
2. Because of this separation, academies have greater control over their budget
3. They also do not have to follow the national curriculum as stringently as maintained schools, although they are expected to still provide a 'broad and balanced' curriculum.

When Michael Gove was Secretary of State for Education he announced that the government would eventually be making all state schools convert to academies. This meant a huge number of maintained schools academised quite quickly. Gove's announcement was later reversed, so schools no longer *had* to convert, but the government offered incentives to schools which did turn into academies.

A type of academy is a free school, which is effectively a new academy. They can be set up by charities, businesses, or a federation. There is no difference between a free school and an academy, except that an academy used to be a maintained school.

Academies, like maintained schools, can be either primary or secondary.

Four myths about academies

Myth: Academies are failing schools

While it's true that in the early days of academies that it was underperforming schools which were converted to academy-status, that is not the case any more. Nowadays academies are just normal state schools, and they tend to perform similarly to maintained schools.

Myth: Academies can teach what they want

Academies don't have to teach the national curriculum, much like private schools, but they do still have to teach a 'broad and balanced curriculum' which includes maths, science, and English. They also have to teach religious education. From 2020 academies, as with all other schools, will have to teach relationships and sex education (RSE) from year 7 onwards.

Myth: Academies are all owned by businesses

Initially academies were known as 'sponsor-led', which meant they were funded and partially operated by a corporate company. This is now not the case, as the majority academies are now run by an academy trust and funded by the government. Some academies still have sponsors such as businesses, universities, other schools, faith groups, or voluntary groups - but they still have to operate like any normal school.

Myth: Academies aren't inspected

All academies are inspected by Ofsted using the same framework and timescales as other state schools.

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Grammar schools

This is the name of any academically selective state-funded school.

Non-selective state schools are known as comprehensive schools.

Grammar schools can be academies or maintained, and are simply academically selective state secondary schools. Most of these were phased out from the 1980s onwards, but some regions of the country have a few remaining.

There are only 164 fully selective grammar schools left in England, with some areas such as Kent, South West London, Cheshire, Lancashire, and Buckinghamshire having multiple.

In order to gain admission pupils sit the 11+ exam, which is usually a combination of verbal and non-verbal reasoning, maths, and English. Because of their relative scarcity, these schools have become increasingly difficult to get into.

There are also eight bilateral schools left, which have both a comprehensive and a grammar 'stream', so the school is about 50:50 selective to non-selective. In practice these schools are often undersubscribed for the grammar stream as they are all in areas with a high number of selective schools.

There are another 36 partially selective schools, which take a percentage of students based on their academic ability (usually 10-20%) as well as for other abilities such as music or sport.

It is currently illegal to build new grammar schools, although this is something the current government have been debating changing. There has been discussion around the expansion of existing grammar schools, with governmental funding put aside for this purpose, but no plans have been unveiled as of yet.

Confusingly, many private schools are called 'grammar schools' because they were historically free, selective schools before they converted to private.

Faith schools

Roughly a third of state schools in England are faith schools, this simply means any school with a religious ethos, character, or ties with a religious organisation.

Faith schools are allowed to prioritise admissions to people within their own faith, although many faith schools (particularly Church of England schools) do not have these admissions criteria in place.

Faith schools can be primary or secondary and academies or maintained. Usually if they are maintained they are connected with a local diocese or parish, if they are Christian.

For maintained faith schools there is no real difference in terms of teaching, as the school must still adhere to the national curriculum. The key change is that for religious studies lessons the schools are free to only teach their own beliefs, rather than those of other religions.

Faith academies have the same freedom as non-religious academies, however they are not permitted to teach anything relating to creationism nor are they allowed to omit evolution from science lessons. This was a big concern among critics of academies, so has been monitored by the Department for Education. However faith academies do have a lot of curriculum autonomy in other areas.

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Most faith schools are Church of England, followed by Roman Catholic. There are only a handful of state-funded Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu schools in England at the moment. There are many more non-Christian, religious schools in the private sector.

State boarding schools

There are about 40 state boarding schools, where the education is free but charges are made for the boarding provision. This can be a good option for parents who need their children to board, but would prefer a state education.

Many of these schools are mixed - for boarding and for day; some are single sex; and a handful are mixed for day students but have a boys-only boarding offer as well.

These schools can be maintained or academies, and are all secondary-only.

Colleges

Colleges are schools specifically set up for the final two years of education.

There are two main types of colleges: further-education (FE) colleges and sixth form colleges.

These terms can be used interchangeably, but broadly FE colleges tend to be technical colleges which offer diplomas and continued education opportunities. These courses tend to be a lot more vocational and may be offered alongside an industry-based apprenticeship.

Sixth form colleges are generally more academic, offering advanced school-level qualifications - usually A Levels or an equivalent.

Colleges tend to have much larger year groups than at secondary schools as well as a wider selection of courses.

Usually students at either type of college are aged 16-19 (whereby everything is free), but sometimes (particularly at FE colleges) there may be older, adult learners looking to retrain or gain further qualifications, who may be paying a fee for the course.

Some students prefer going to a college over school, as it feels closer to a university experience. While others feel they need the more intimate setting of a school in order to succeed. Many areas do not have schools with sixth forms attached, so students have no choice but to attend a college.

University Technical Colleges

These are schools for pupils aged 14-19 (year 10-13) which are sponsored by a university - who helps design the curriculum and awards specific foundation and full degrees.

These are often more vocationally-focused, with only about 50 in the country. These are free schools, which are funded by the government with additional support from a university.

They broadly follow the curriculum required for different age groups, but also include a range of technical or vocational options and courses.

Each UTC may have its own specialism, depending on the sponsor university. The specialisms are almost always within the STEM field (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics).

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Private schools

Parents may choose private schooling for some or all of their child's education. However, there is as much variance between schools in the private sector as the state, with a number of different decisions to be made.

Private schools generally offer smaller class sizes, more academic selection in terms of admissions, and better or more numerous facilities. They also are often able to offer subjects which are not possible to factor into state schools' curriculums, such as Latin or Ancient Greek.

Fees, scholarships and bursaries - the cost is always a big factor, and in 2018 £15,000 was the average annual cost of day school and now around £37,000 for boarding schools.

Most schools offer scholarships for students who excel academically, or in music/sport/drama. These scholarships can cover a great deal of the fees, but at many schools they only fund a nominal portion.

However, many private schools have charitable status, which allows benefactors to support them. In order to keep their charitable status, many of these schools have to offer bursaries to students from lower-incomes. This can cover the entire fees or a large percentage of them. Schools will assess a family's financial need before giving a bursary. These can come as part of a scholarship or independently.

Admissions - most private schools are selective in some way.

They may have formal entrance tests (particularly for senior schools) or it may be an assessment day (popular among junior schools).

Normally admissions tests will have a maths and an English element, as well as subject specialist tests for older students or highly selective schools.

Some oversubscribed schools may require you to register your child many years in advance of their admission. A handful of schools have been known to ask for children to be registered for admission at birth!

Day schools

Most private schools are day, meaning that students go home at the end of each day.

Occasionally a day school may still have 'Saturday-school' (a feature in a number of boarding schools), but generally they operate like most schools.

Sometimes day schools will have longer hours than state schools, usually to factor in extra-curricular activities or additional subjects.

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Boarding schools

These are schools where students sleep at school.

At some schools there is only weekly boarding, so students are expected to go home for weekends, while others have full-boarding, where students remain at weekends and only return home for holidays and 'exeats' (which are specific weekends where everyone returns home).

Most boarding schools offer a combination of weekly and full-boarding, particularly if they have international students as returning home every weekend is not an option for students with families abroad.

Many parents who want full-boarding will think very carefully about sending their children to schools which allows weekly boarding or has a mixture of day and boarding. This is because at some schools only a small handful of students remain in the evenings or at the weekends (usually international students) and parents worry their children will be lonely.

At majority full-boarding schools, most weekends have activities and other opportunities laid on for students to keep them occupied.

Some schools also allow day-boarding and flexi-boarding. Day-boarding is popular at schools with a mixture of day and boarding students, particularly when it is majority boarding. Day-boarders are usually expected to have dinner at school, and remain to complete a set number of hours of homework or 'prep'. These students effectively only go home to sleep, which can be an effective way of studying - particularly for older children. This can allow the academic and social benefits of boarding, without the same financial expenses.

Flexi-boarders are students who will occasionally stay over, perhaps for a night or two a week or a handful of times a term. This is a good option for younger students who are working up to boarding, or for families with hectic schedules who need the flexibility of boarding as an option.

Many boarding schools have compulsory school on Saturday mornings.

Boarding schools generally start at 11 or 13, however there are a few boarding schools which take students as young as 7.

International schools

There are a few international schools in the UK, and the definition for these schools is a little bit woolly. Effectively it can mean a school which has an international ethos, environment, and curriculum or a school which follows the curriculum of a country other than that of the UK.

We have a few of these in England, some of which follow an 'international curriculum' - which usually involves the International Baccalaureate and IGCSEs, with a diverse, multicultural student body. Others are tied to the US system of education or French model, and are usually aimed at expats living in the UK.

Most international schools are private and boarding, although there are a couple of state ones as well. They are often a good option for families who have recently moved to the UK, and want to continue with the same model of education they had previously been following.

The schools with an 'international curriculum' tend to follow a fairly similar curriculum to English schools, but are often connected with other schools worldwide. This means for families who have to relocate often, children can receive a very similar style of schooling around the world.

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Alternative schools

This is a bit of a catch-all category for any schools which are outside of the more traditional structures and practices. Some are private and some are state-funded. There are a handful of alternative schools which are very famous and have caused some controversy over the years for their less orthodox approaches to education.

Many alternative schools are known as Steiner schools, which are a type of school developed by Rudolf Steiner in the 20th Century. It is founded on the idea that children should have autonomy over their own learning, so children can choose what subject they want to do with lessons focusing on skills and topics, rather than a subject-based curriculum.

Some Steiner schools offer formal qualifications like GCSEs, but many do not, so students can leave with no formal qualifications or have to take exams at another centre.

Other schools are 'democratic schools', which are quite similar to Steiner schools. There are only a couple of schools like this, and they encourage students to be active participants in the decision-making process at the school. If this sounds reminiscent of the school in Enid Blyton's *Naughtiest Girls at School* books, that's because this model of education is exactly what inspired Blyton's writing.

This kind of schooling often prioritises holistic learning and centres emotional and social wellbeing over academic development. While these schools are not for everyone, they can work well for students who struggle with the confines of more traditional establishments.

There are also a number of private schools which follow more traditional teaching methods, but have a more alternative ethos. This can sometimes be a happy medium between the two educational approaches.

Alternative schools are not to be confused with 'alternative provision schools', which are an updated name for 'pupil referral units' - schools set up to deal with students with behavioural issues too severe for full-time, mainstream education.

SEND provision

For students with special educational needs and/or a disability, the schools listed above may not be appropriate.

Some students may need specific equipment or provisions that a mainstream school cannot provide or afford, while others may need an entirely different curriculum or focus.

There are a huge range of SEND schools, both private and state, so we will soon be publishing an additional guide to this type of schooling.

Home-schooling

Home-schooling has grown in popularity over the last three years, by around 40% according to the BBC.

It is a popular option for parents who have concerns about their children's wellbeing in school. This could be a decision linked to bullying, mental health, quality of teaching, or behavioural concerns.

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It is completely legal for children to be home-schooled full-time or part-time at home, and often your local authority can provide support.

There are a number of online schools that can also support home education, particularly for more vulnerable children, or students who have emotional or behavioural issues.

Children must be given a “suitable education” according to the government, but there is no obligation to follow the national curriculum. Currently local authorities are not responsible for monitoring home education, but there is a chance this might change over the next few years.

Home education can be done by parents, tutors, or a local co-operative of home schoolers so children are taught together.

It is important that you consider how to register your child for national exams like GCSEs and A Levels, especially if they want to pursue higher education at university as these will be necessary.

GCSE Maths and English Language are also essential for many jobs, and they will often ask for proof that a person has above a C grade in both these subjects.

Examinations

There are a number of national exams that almost every child will take in some form: SATs, GCSEs, and A Levels.

SATs

SATs are at primary school level, and usually in state schools only. These are far more important for the school than the child, as they are used to rank primary schools and measure achievement and success between schools.

The SAT results are often sent through to secondary schools as an indication of the level a child is working at when they complete primary education, and are then used to indicate how well a secondary school has built upon that initial score.

SATs are taken in year 2 (KS1) and year 6 (KS2). The KS1 SATs are being phased out as of 2023.

The tests are taken in the classroom and administered by the teachers.

For KS1 the tests are in maths and English (reading and spelling, punctuation and grammar). The tests are not properly timed and are intended to be taken in a relaxed setting.

The KS2 SATs are slightly more formal, but still usually taken in the classroom. These are in English, maths, and sometimes science. The tests are 45 minutes long, and some students can feel quite unnerved by the process as it is often their first interaction with exams. The papers are moderated externally and the results normally come back in July.

SATs used to be taken in year 9 as well, but the KS3 SATs were abolished around 2010.

GCSEs

GCSEs are taken across KS4. These are the exams which have changed the most under the last few Education Secretaries.

Grades used to be A*-G, but are now graded 9-1.

The new grades were introduced in phases, so some students have a combination of letter and number grades. Students will all have number grades now.

The core subjects every student must take are: English Literature, English Language, Maths, and combined Science (two GCSEs which cover all three areas of science).

Most schools will make students take a humanities subject like History or Geography and a language. This helps a school fulfil the English Baccalaureate (EBacc), something

New grading structure	Current grading structure
9	
8	A*
7	A
6	B
5	C
4	
3	D
2	E
1	F
	G
U	U

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the government introduced a few years ago. The EBacc is just any combination of the core subjects, a humanity, and a language all passed above a grade 5. EBaccs are mainly used by the government to compare schools with one another, and many schools are now actively encouraging students to take different combinations if that suits their interests and learning better. The EBacc is not compulsory, and many schools - particularly independent ones - opt not to follow it.

On average students tend to take between 9 and 11 GCSEs. There is a tendency that state schools encourage students to take more than are normally taken at private schools. However, unsurprisingly, it is quality over quantity that is most important: it is better to do fewer subjects very well than lots poorly.

Schools may also require students to take ICT and/or Religious Studies (particularly if they are a faith school). Every school is free to set its own additional criteria for GCSEs, as long as the core components are fulfilled, and many schools will have a larger number of compulsory subjects than just the statutory ones.

Some schools will offer more choice for GCSEs than others, particularly private schools with more resources. Very few state schools offer Ancient Greek GCSE, for example, whereas lots of private schools are able to provide it as an option.

Current subjects available are:

Core	Common optional	Less common
English Language	History	Astronomy
English Literature	Geography	Ancient Greek
Maths	Religious Studies	Mandarin
Science (single, combined, or triple)	ICT	Russian
	Computer Science	Portuguese
	Business Studies	Hebrew
	Drama and Theatre Studies	Arabic
	Music	Economics
	Art and Design	Psychology
	Food Technology	Sociology
	Textiles	Law
	Graphic Design	Persian
	Product Design	Turkish
	Physical Education	Urdu
	French	Italian
	Spanish	Japanese
	German	
	Latin	

You can take GCSEs privately at a registered centre, or automatically through school. The private option is useful for people who are homeschooling or students sitting exams separately from school, often in things like another language or other subjects not commonly taught.

There are a number of exam boards who all cover most of the subjects above. Often there is not too much disparity between exam boards for students, as the content is roughly the same. Exam boards are often decided based on teaching staff's preferences and suitability for the cohort.

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Most exam boards have removed the majority of coursework from GCSEs, apart from with more practical or artistic subjects like textiles or drama.

The main exam boards are currently:

Edexcel
AQA
EDUQAS
WJEC
OCR
Cambridge University

These exam boards also all administer A Levels as well.

GCSEs tend to start being taught in year 10, with exams sat at the end of year 11. Sometimes more able students are fast-tracked and take an exam in year 10, with the intention of taking a higher qualification (like an AS exam) in year 11 - or simply to spread out the number of exams.

Increasingly teachers are beginning to teach the course content in year 9, in order to maximise the amount of time students' have to learn the material for the exams.

A Levels

A Levels are the major KS5 exams. Most students take three A Levels, although it is not uncommon for people to take four or sometimes even five.

However, to get into university you rarely need more than three, and many schools will only allow students to take three subjects.

They are graded on an A*-F grading, while AS Levels (seen as 40% of an A Level) are graded A-G.

The qualification used to be in two parts, AS Levels which were taken in year 12 and A Levels, taken in year 13. The marks from both years would contribute towards a student's overall grade, and the course material would be complementary.

Now most A Levels have been 'reformed' in England, which means the AS component has been dropped and the course is now taught over two years, with final exams at the end of year 13. Often there is a coursework element for some humanities and arts subjects.

AS Levels still exist, but are now a separate independent exam. This can work for students who want to take four subjects, but don't feel they could cope with four 'full' courses. Instead they would take three subjects fully and one on a shorter, condensed course. The AS level could be taken at the end of year 12, leaving the student with only three subjects to focus on in year 13, or taken alongside the others for both years.

In Wales, A Levels are still unreformed, if following the Welsh board.

A Levels are offered in a range of subjects, similar to those offered at GCSE. There are no compulsory subjects, the only restrictions are down to individual schools' timetables.

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Common A Level subjects offered are:

English Literature	Sociology
English Literature and Language (combined A Level)	Psychology
Maths	Economics
Chemistry	French
Physics	Spanish
Biology	German
Computing	Latin
Theology and Philosophy	Art & Design
History	Drama & Theatre Studies
Geography	Music

This is certainly not an exhaustive list, but an example of what may be commonly on offer. Sixth form colleges are usually able to offer a lot more choice when it comes to A Level options.

International Baccalaureate Diploma (IB)

Many private schools, particularly international schools, and a few state schools offer the IB. This is closer to the GCSE system in terms of subject choice, as there are core subjects which must be taken.

The IB is taken around the world, getting more popular every year.

Six subjects are taken at either a higher level (HL) or a standard level (SL). Three or four must be taken at HL and the rest at SL.

Students must take a subject from each of the first five groups, and then either one from group six or an additional from another group (subject to permission).

Group 1 (Language and literature):

- Literature
- Language and Literature

This can be taken in one of 80 languages, but is intended to be in the student's native language. In the UK this would be expected to be in English, unless taught at a bilingual school.

Group 2 (Language acquisition)

- Foreign language (modern or classical)
- Language ab initio (a new language, but this can only be taken at SL)

Group 3 (Individuals and societies)

- Business Management
- Economics
- History
- Geography
- Philosophy
- Psychology
- World Religions (SL only)
- Environmental systems and societies (SL only)

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Group 4 (Experimental sciences)

- Chemistry
- Biology
- Physics
- Design technology
- Computer science
- Sport, exercise & health science (SL)
- Environmental systems and societies (SL only)

Group 5 (Mathematics)

- Maths
- Further Maths (HL)
- Mathematical studies (SL)

Group 6 (Arts)

- Dance
- Music
- Theatre
- Visual Arts
- Film

This is not an exhaustive list as the course options fluctuate year on year, but is a standard sample of what is often offered by schools.

As well as well the academic exams, there are also three core requirements:

Extended essay - students have to write an independent research essay of up to 4,000 words

Theory of Knowledge - students must learn about critical thinking and ideas around knowledge, this is assessed through a coursework and a presentation

Creativity, activity, service (CAS) - students must take part in community work, physical activity, and creative activities for 3-4 hours a week over the two years they are doing the programme

The IB suits students who are academically able with interests across subjects.

Each subject is awarded a mark out of 7, with an additional 3 points for the extended essay and theory of knowledge papers. This gives a total of 45. Top universities will look for students with 40+.

The Cambridge Pre-U Diploma

Some private schools, and one or two state schools, offer the Pre-U instead of A Levels. It works similarly to A Levels in that you choose 3-4 subjects and are assessed at the end of year 13.

Before the A Levels were reformed the differences between the two qualifications were far greater, as the Pre-U had no year 12 exams and was assessed in one go at the end of year 13.

The Pre-U is favoured by schools which are considered to be more academic, as it is perceived to be a more rigorous exam. In reality it is fairly similar to the current A Levels, but teachers have more freedom when setting the curriculum. This is one reason why it suits private schools better, as it does rely on schools having a lot of resources and small class sizes.

The grading system is also different.

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BTECs

For students looking for more vocational qualifications, BTECs are a popular choice. These tend to be offered by UTC or FE colleges, or at some schools alongside A Level options. They can be taken on their own, or combined with other qualifications.

Until 2017 BTECs were predominantly assessed through coursework, however they are increasingly requiring externally-moderated exams.

BTECs cover a range of subjects including: business, media studies, agriculture, tourism, construction, engineering, and art.

These qualifications can be used to gain entry to higher education at university-level, but it is course dependent. Some will accept a BTEC on its own, while others will only accept it as part of multiple qualifications (which must include A Levels or an equivalent).

Vocational courses (previously NVQs)

Further education colleges, and some higher education institutions with an FE department, offer vocational courses which are the same level as A Levels (level 3). They are usually taken in order to gain employment, or as part of an apprenticeship, and were previously known as NVQs.

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