

*British civilisation and institutions*  
EDUCATION (2 sessions)

BRITISH EDUCATION OPERATES ON THREE levels: schools, higher education and further/adult education. Schools are mainly mixed-sex, although there are some single-sex schools, and are divided into state (maintained from public funds) and independent (privately financed) sectors (the latter mainly in England). But there is no common educational organization for the whole country. Northern Ireland, Scotland and England/Wales have somewhat different school systems. Further/adult and higher education generally have the same structure throughout Britain and are mostly state-funded.

The quality of British education concerns parents, employers, politicians and students. School inspectors have criticized standards in English, Mathematics, Technology and writing and reading skills. In 1997, the *World Economic Forum* claimed that Britain ranked 32nd out of 53 countries in the quality of its primary and secondary schools. A 1997 *National Institute of Economic and Social Research* study showed that British thirteen-to-fourteen-year-olds were one year behind most European countries and even further behind Japan, Korea and Singapore.

Later, in 2001, the *Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)* reported that Britain was slipping down the global league table of secondary schools (19th out of 28), defined by good passes in national examinations. Britain also had some of the worst pre-school education and child-care in the western world, with a lack of high-quality nurseries, low-qualified and underpaid staff and poor working conditions. A *National Skills Task Force* in 2000 reported that 7 million adults (nearly one in five) in Britain were functionally illiterate. It is argued that low standards of literacy and numeracy stem from decades of inadequate school education.

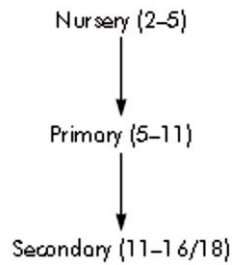
But the *OECD* said that Britain leads the world in higher education, defined as having the highest proportion (35.6 per cent) of university graduates aged twenty-one, largely because of short (three-year) degree courses. However, in Britain itself there is criticism of degree standards, some university courses and varying performances between different universities.

But British education should not be seen in a wholly negative light. School examination results have improved in recent years, although some critics attribute this to lower standards. Many schools, teachers and students in the state and independent sectors produce excellent work, as do the universities. It is the failing and underperforming state schools and universities which catch the media headlines, although many of the schools have now improved. The Labour government in 1997 prioritized education, promised to focus on its quality and to make it a lifelong learning experience. But, while there has been improvement in literacy and at the primary school level, secondary school education still has weaknesses and the public are dissatisfied with Labour progress in raising educational standards.

**The state school system**

State education in the UK is free and compulsory for children between the ages of five and sixteen. The vast majority of children are educated in state primary and secondary schools. But the state system is complicated by remnants of the 1944 Act and a diversity of school types throughout the country.

Pupils attend primary school in the state sector from the age of five and then move to secondary schools normally at eleven until the ages of sixteen to eighteen.



The current state school system

## **The independent (fee-paying) school sector**

The independent school sector exists mainly in England, is separate from the state school system and caters for some 6 per cent of all British children, from the ages of four to eighteen at various levels of education. There are 2,400 independent schools with over 563,500 pupils.

Its financing derives from investments and the fees paid by the pupils' parents for their education, which vary between schools and can amount to several thousand pounds a year. The independent sector is dependent upon its charitable and tax-exempt status to survive. This means that the schools are not taxed on their income if it is used only for educational purposes. There are a minority of scholarship holders, whose expenses are covered by their schools.

### **School organization**

The school day in state and independent schools usually runs from 9.00 a.m. until 4 p.m. and the school year is divided into three terms (autumn, spring and summer). Classes in British schools used to be called 'forms' and in secondary schools were numbered from one to six. But most schools have adopted year numbers from 7 to 11 in secondary schools, with a two-year sixth form for advanced work.

A reduced birth rate in recent years led to a decrease in the number of schoolchildren, resulting in the closure of schools in rural and urban areas. Numbers have since increased and the Labour government is committed to reducing average class size for primary schools to below thirty, although many secondary schools have classes with over thirty pupils.

### **Higher education**

Should a pupil obtain the required examination results at A- or alternative levels, and be successful at interviews, he or she may go on to an institution of higher education, such as a university or college. The student, after a prescribed period of study and after passing examinations, will receive a degree and become a graduate of that institution. In the past only a small proportion of the age group in Britain proceeded to higher education, in contrast to the higher rates in many major nations. But, following a recent rapid increase in student numbers (with the ratio of female to male students being three to two), the numbers are now 33 per cent in England and Wales, 40 per cent in Scotland and 45 per cent in Northern Ireland.

There were 23 British universities in 1960. After a period of expansion in the 1960s and reforms in 1992 when existing institutions such as polytechnics were given university status, there are now some 87 universities and 64 institutions of higher education, with 1.3 million full-time students in 1999. The Open University and the independent University of Buckingham are additional university-level institutions.

The universities can be broadly classified into four types. The ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge (composed of their many colleges) date from the twelfth century. But until the nineteenth century they were virtually the only English universities and offered no places to women.

However, other older universities were founded in Scotland, such as St Andrews (1411), Glasgow (1450), Aberdeen (1494) and Edinburgh (1583). A second group comprises the 'redbrick' or civic universities such as Leeds, Liverpool and Manchester, which were created between 1850 and 1930. The third group consists of universities founded after the Second World War and in the 1960s. Many of the latter, such as Sussex, York and East Anglia, are associated with towns rather than big cities. The fourth group comprises the 'new universities' created in 1992 when polytechnics and some other colleges attained university status.

The bachelor's degree (Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science, BA or BSc) is usually taken in final examinations at the end of the third year of study, although some degree courses do vary in length in different parts of Britain (such as Scotland with a four-year MA degree). The degree is divided into first-, second- and third-class honours. Some degrees depend entirely upon the examination results, while others include continuing assessment over the period of study.

Universities are independent institutions created by royal charter, enjoy academic freedom, appoint their own staff, award their own degrees and decide which students to admit. But they are in practice dependent upon government money. This derives mainly from finance (dependent upon the number of students recruited) given by government to Universities Funding Councils for distribution to the universities through university Vice-Chancellors who are the chief executive officers of the universities.

### **Further, adult and lifelong education**

An important aspect of British education is the provision of further and adult education, whether by voluntary bodies, trade unions or other institutions. The present organizations originated to some degree in the thirst for knowledge which was felt by working-class people in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, particularly after the arrival of elementary state education and growing literacy. Today a wide range of educational opportunities are provided by self-governing state-funded colleges of further education and other institutions. These offer a considerable selection of subjects at basic levels for part- and full-time students. Some students may study in the evenings or on day-release from their employment. Such studies for students over sixteen are often work-related, include government training programmes and have close ties with local commerce and industry.

Adult education is provided by these colleges, the universities, the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), evening institutes, local societies and clubs. Adult courses may be vocational (for employment) or recreational (for pleasure), and cover a variety of activities and programmes.

Some 4 million students of very varying ages are taking further and adult education courses in one form or another. There has been a recent expansion of continuing-education projects and a range of programmes specifically designed for employment purposes and to provide people with access qualifications for further training. The Labour government sees further and adult education as part of a lifelong learning process, which it wants to prioritize. The aim is to encourage the continuous development of people's skills, knowledge and understanding. But further education is suffering at present from a lack of resources and funding, and inspectors found in 2001 that a third of further education colleges were inadequate and had low standards.

### **Attitudes to education**

Concerns about the quality of British education and educational policy at all levels are consistently voiced by a majority of respondents to public opinion polls. They think that state schools are not run well and that more money should be spent on education generally. The Labour government has responded by giving more funding to the system and by tinkering with its structures. But serious dissatisfaction continued to be voiced in the polls in 2000–01, and education is likely to continue as a major problem in British life.

There have been continuous and vigorous debates about the performance and goals of British education at all levels since the 1970s. Traditionalist critics, who want disciplined learning programmes, feel that state comprehensive schools and 'creative/progressive' methods of child-centred teaching are not producing the kind of people needed for contemporary society. It is argued that pupils lack the basic skills of numeracy and literacy and are unprepared for the realities of the outside world. Employers frequently criticize both schools and higher education for the quality of their products.

Critics argue that an educational system should not be solely devoted either to elitist standards or to market considerations. It should try to provide a choice between the academic/liberal tradition, the technical and the vocational. The lack of adequate vocational or technical education and training is creating big problems for employers, who argue that they cannot find competently trained staff to fill vacancies. The future of British education will depend

in large part on how government reforms work and how they are perceived by teachers, parents, students and employers.

On the other hand, a 1999 MORI/British Council poll found that 76 per cent of overseas respondents regarded the British as well-educated. Higher education was particularly well respected, with 88 per cent of respondents rating it as 'good'.