

A man with glasses, wearing a light blue shirt and a striped tie, stands in a classroom. He is holding a white marker in his hands. He has a purple lanyard around his neck with the text "Learning together, achieving Greater" and "Learning for All" visible. In the background, there is a whiteboard with some faint writing and a brick wall with colorful sticky notes. The overall scene is a classroom setting.

The Education System in England

NOWTEACH

The education system in England

For many people changing career to teaching, schools are a foreign country: they do things differently there. It won't stay this way - your induction and first days in school will give you all you need to know and more. From where to make a hot drink to child protection policies, it is a vertiginous learning curve, so the more you know beforehand the better.

At Now Teach, we support you through teacher training and beyond. That support begins here and now, so that you have the right foundations as you apply to join our network and to become a trainee.

If you are wondering which Ofsted ratings is best, how many Key Stages there are and why academies are different, you are reading the right thing. This booklet gives you the foundations of the education system in England. To give yourself the best possible start, we recommend that you read and absorb this information before you start your teacher training.

The other UK nations have similar education systems but there are also several key differences. To avoid confusion and ensure this document is relevant to you, we focus solely on the English education system.

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Stages of education: school years and Key Stages

There are five main stages of education in England. Initially, they are grouped by pupil age then, as pupils get older, on the qualifications they are studying for. In England, it is compulsory for children to be in education between the ages of five and 18 years old.

Early years Foundation Stage (EYFS)	Child development from birth to 5 years
Primary	From 5 - 11 years old, also called Key Stages 1 & 2
Secondary	From 11 - 16 (or 18 if the school has a 6th form). Referred to as Key Stages 3, 4 & 5 and pupils study for GCSEs in this time
Further Education (FE)	From 16 – 19 (although most may have adult students too). Students study A-levels advanced apprenticeships and other similar qualifications
Higher Education (HE)	From 18 onwards: foundation degrees, bachelor's degrees, masters and PhDs

In England, education is split into different Key Stages. You will become very familiar with at least two of these during your time in the classroom. The Key Stages represent different periods of a pupil's education.

	EYFS	Reception
Primary	Key Stage 1: 5-7 years old	Year 1
		Year 2
	Key Stage 2: 7-11 years old	Year 3
		Year 4
		Year 5
		Year 6
Secondary	Key Stage 3: 11-14 years old	Year 7
		Year 8
		Year 9
6th Form/FE	Key Stage 4: 14-16 years old	Year 10
		Year 11
6th Form/FE	Key Stage 5: 16-19 years old	Year 12
		Year 13

As you might expect, this simple outline is not nearly so straightforward in practice and there are some differences in Key Stages 3, 4 and 5.

Key Stages 3 and 4

In some schools, they prioritise GCSE exam preparation by changing the timings of the Key Stages. Key Stage 3 is condensed from three into two years (Years 7 & 8) and Key Stage 4 becomes three (Years 9, 10 and 11). This means GCSEs can be taught over an additional year, with pupils making GCSE subject choices at the end of Year 8 instead of Year 9.

Key Stage 5

Many pupils will have a choice over where to study for their A-levels. Where their school has a sixth form, pupils completing GCSEs can continue to study in the same school. In schools without a sixth form, pupils must attend a separate sixth form college or Further Education (FE) college.

At Key Stage 5, pupils can also sometimes take GCSEs and other qualifications. Pupils that don't get a GCSE grade 4 or above in English language or maths must re-sit these during sixth form or college/sixth form college.

The national curriculum

The national curriculum (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/national-curriculum>) was introduced in England in the late 1980s and provides all schools with a framework for which subjects are compulsory, what should be taught and when pupils should learn it.

Many Now Teachers continue to be surprised that although there is a national curriculum, many schools do not use textbooks and there isn't a centralised bank of pre-written resources or lesson plans. Many teachers write most of their own lessons themselves, or adapt from templates, plans and resources available in some schools or online.

As a trainee teaching, writing your own lessons is a vital part of your training, but many experienced trainees will still be required to do this.

The National Curriculum across the Key Stages

Subject	Key Stage 1 (age 5-7)	Key Stage 2 (age 7-11)	Key Stage 3 (age 11-14)	Key Stage 4 (age 14-16)
English	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mathematics	✓	✓	✓	✓
Science	✓	✓	✓	✓
Art & Design	✓	✓	✓	
Citizenship			✓	✓
Computing	✓	✓	✓	✓
Design & Technology	✓	✓	✓	
Languages		✓	✓	
Geography	✓	✓	✓	
History	✓	✓	✓	
Music	✓	✓	✓	
Physical Education	✓	✓	✓	✓

A detailed breakdown of the topics to be covered for each subject can be found on the Department for Education's (DfE) website.

In addition, all children must be provided with a basic curriculum of religious education and pupils in Key Stages 3 & 4 must receive sex and relationship education.

At Key Stage 4, although some subjects are not compulsory, schools must provide lessons in arts (art, music, drama, dance and media arts, design and technology), humanities (geography and history) and a modern foreign language.

There are some more exceptions but this is the backbone of the National Curriculum in England.

How sciences are taught in England

Teaching

Of all the subjects in the National Curriculum, science is probably the most varied. Even if you're not considering science, it's worthwhile noting how something that seems quite simple can actually be quite complicated in a school.

- Some schools teach Combined Science at Key Stage 3, where the three sciences are taught as one subject, and then separate them out at Key Stage 4 to be taught as Physics, Chemistry and Biology.
- Some schools teach Combined Science throughout Key Stages 3 and 4, expecting their science teachers to teach all three subjects.
- Some schools teach Combined Science throughout Key Stages 3 and 4, rotating staff as topics change so they can teach their specialisms.

Whichever way your school structures their science curriculum, as a trainee you are highly likely to be teaching across all three science subjects at Key Stage 3.

You will need to check what your school does so you can prepare appropriately.

Exams

In some schools, every pupil will do at least a double Science GCSE (awarded as two GCSEs), while some will do Biology, Chemistry and Physics as three different GCSEs.

There are also different qualifications available: traditional GCSEs and applied GCSEs. Again, you will need to check with your school.

Qualification levels and grades

Levels

There are hundreds of different kinds of qualifications and each one, from Grade 2 piano to a PhDs, is arranged in eight different levels. Secondary schools deal with Levels 1, 2 & 3, but any of these qualifications can be taken outside of school, at a college or university, at any age.

Level 1	GCSE (grades D-G)
Level 2	GCSE (grades A*-C)
Level 3	A-level
Level 4	Higher National Certificate (HNC)
Level 5	Higher National Diploma (HND)
Level 6	Non-honours bachelor's degree
Level 7	Bachelor's degree with honours
Level 8	Master's degree
Level 9	Doctoral degree

Grades

For GCSEs, a grade A*-G is awarded. The highest grade is 9 and a pass is a 4. A-levels passes are graded A*-E.

BTECs, a vocational qualification, are graded as Pass, Merit, Distinction.

Additional GCSE grading information can be found here:

<https://ofqual.blog.gov.uk/2018/03/02/gcse-9-to-1-grades-a-brief-guide-for-parents>

Target Grades

All pupils in all subjects will have target grades in Key Stages 3, 4 & 5. These grades will be based on their prior attainment in previous Key Stages. These are to ensure that all pupils achieve the highest possible grades they can, so the grades are often very ambitious. Schools will all have slightly different ways of calculating and using these grades both with staff and with pupils.

Exam Boards

GCSEs and A Levels are written and examined by several different exam boards. The main exam boards in England are:

Pearson/Edexcel	https://qualifications.pearson.com/en/home.html
AQA	http://www.aqa.org.uk
OCR	http://www.ocr.org.uk
WJEC	http://www.wjec.co.uk

For each examination, there is a 'specification' that identifies the different units and content that make up the qualification. These are available on the exam boards' websites. Your school will be able to tell you the exam board they use for your subject, so you can research the specification in advance.

Ofsted and inspections

You will hear a lot about Ofsted and inspections in UK schools; some of will be positive and some if it will be less so.

Ofsted was set up in 1992 to inspect and monitor how schools are performing. Before Ofsted, inspections were carried out by local authorities. Ofsted is led by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI) Amanda Spielman and the Chair is Julius Weinberg.

Inspectors generally give schools one day's notice and the inspection takes around two days. Inspectors spend most of their time observing lessons and gathering evidence from staff and pupils.

Ofsted reports are posted on the Ofsted website and the school's website. Often, the school's development plan will use the inspection report to guide the improvements to be made.

There are four possible grades a school can receive in an Ofsted inspection. All schools are aiming for at least a Grade 2 or 'Good'.

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Requires Improvement
Grade 4	Special Measures

'Outstanding' schools will not receive a routine inspection unless concerns are raised about performances.

'Good' schools normally receive an inspection approximately every 4 years.

'Requires Improvement' schools will generally be inspected within 30 months. Schools judged 'Requires Improvement' twice in a row receive additional monitoring visits to make sure that the school is making the required progress.

'Special Measures' schools are either judged to have 'serious weaknesses' or, if it doesn't have the capacity to improve, requiring Special Measures.

As a part of Special Measures, the school will be required to find new governance, create an improvement plan and Ofsted will often setup regular monitoring visits. To help the improvement plan, schools will be given additional funds and external support.

When regular inspections find the school has improved, there is another full Ofsted inspection.

Big debates in education and wider reading

Education matters. It matters for us as individuals, our families, our communities and our economy. Some of the big debates in education have gone on for millennia, while others are triggered by yesterday's policy changes. The one shared thing is that they are discussed with passion by teachers and, as you progress in your training, you'll be debating them too.

If you are looking for a general introduction to education, Oxford University Press has published 'Education' as part of its A Very Short Introduction series. It is worth pointing out that being very short, it should be seen as nothing more than a starting point.

<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/education-a-very-short-introduction-9780199643264?cc=gb&lang=en&>

There is no single history of English education that will give you the full picture but here are some of the key themes and questions you will undoubtedly have to think about.

Progressive vs. traditional education

This debate takes many forms and ranges from the role of technology to the best way to discipline a child. In a nutshell, progressive education theory believes that children will learn best when they discover things for themselves and develop at their natural rate, prioritising their own interests.

Traditionalists tend to focus on the importance of a core body of knowledge that should be passed down from generation to generation, and favour teaching instructions which emphasises practice, whole-class instruction and individual practice.

There are many other nuances to these debates and the following reads can take you further:

- ***Getting it wrong from the beginning***, Kieran Egan. A study of the inheritance of progressive thought in education.
<https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300105100/getting-it-wrong-beginning>
- ***7 Myths about Education***, Daisy Christodoulou. An analysis of common memes in English education and where they are going wrong. Includes an analysis of Ofsted approaches pre-2010, why the internet does not change everything, and a defence of the importance of knowledge in a curriculum.

<https://www.routledge.com/Seven-Myths-About-Education/Christodoulou/p/book/9780415746823>

School structures

The state school system in the UK has always been varied and over the past years this has increased.

Currently, the government funds selective state grammar schools, local authority comprehensive schools, grant-maintained schools, faith schools run by religious trusts and academies run by charitable trusts. Some academies were forced to convert to academy status due to low academic performance, others which chose to do so, while free schools are new academies established since 2010.

These are organised in different ways in terms of geography. Some academies are independent, while others are part of multi-academy trusts (MATs). Some MATs are based in one area and some are national. Other schools are accountable to their Local Education Authority (LEA).

In policy, the debate tends to oscillate between what can be done to improve standards directly within schools, or what can be done to improve structures that will lead to improved standards.

Some useful literature on the subject is available:

- **School performance in academy chains and local authorities 2017**, Jon Andrews. A report for the Education Policy Institute looking at school performance, admissions and capacity.
https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/EPI-Academy-LA-Performance_.pdf
- **Chain Effects 2018**: The impact of academy chains on low-income pupils
<https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/chain-effects-2018-academy-chains/>

Education and social mobility

Many discussions in education focus on the role of schools in improving students' future prospects and driving social mobility.

Broadly speaking, some believe that schools can make a positive difference to social mobility for the most disadvantaged, while others start from the view that broader societal inequality needs to be addressed first and schools alone cannot solve the issues.

To be more informed about the debate, it is helpful to read the reports into the issues. The Social Mobility Commission (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/social-mobility-commission>) publishes State of the Nation reports, finding that inequality is entrenched in Britain from birth to work.

The Institute of Fiscal Studies (www.ifs.org.uk) regularly publishes on outcomes for the most disadvantaged students in the country across a range of metrics, from earning potential, to reading scores to university progression.

- **Social Mobility in Great Britain: fifth state of the nation report 2017**, sixth state of the nation report 2017, Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-mobility-in-great-britain-state-of-the-nation-2018-to-2019>
- Institute of Fiscal Studies publications about Education and Social Mobility, 2009-2016
www.ifs.org.uk/research/38
- **Social Mobility 2017**, Sutton Trust 2017: three reports on social mobility and economic success, in partnership with Oxena, Boston Consulting Group and Ipsos Mori. This gives a useful insight into the public's opinions too.
<https://www.suttontrust.com/research-paper/social-mobility-2017-summit-research/>
- **How children succeed**, Paul Tough. This book pulls apart the story usually told about childhood and success revolving around intelligence. Instead he looks at the character qualities that he argues matter most: perseverance, curiosity, conscientiousness, optimism and self-control. He explores how these can be taught.
<http://www.paultough.com/the-books/how-children-succeed/>

Setting and streaming

Reflecting on other debates about social mobility, fairness in education, and the nature of intelligence, many schools take different approaches to setting or streaming students.

- **Setting** is grouping by ability within a subject.
- **Streaming** is where high, middle, and low-attaining students are in the same lessons altogether.

Schools will take very different approaches, although most will set in maths, and the evidence is mixed. What seems to be most important is not whether setting is done at all but how it is done. For example, lower attaining students gain from being placed into smaller groups where teachers can devote them more attention.

- Setting or streaming, Education Endowment Foundation. The EEF provides useful syntheses of the existing research into many topics, including this one.
<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/teaching-learning-toolkit/setting-or-streaming/>

- Keep an eye on the ambitious research project into grouping by ability at the Institute of Education, London here:

<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-centres/centres/groupingstudents>

What cognitive science can teach us

In the last few years, cognitive psychology and neuroscience has helped researchers better understand learning and how memory works. Much of this has been used to help teachers – taking the findings from the lab to the classroom with practical advice.

The debates here often revolve around the strength of the evidence base, the feasibility of certain techniques in the classroom, and accommodating students with special educational needs.

The following books are a good starting point for exploring this powerful area of research:

- ***Why don't students like school?*** Dan T Willingham. 10 chapters of applied cognitive science for the teacher, answering questions with a distilled summary of the research in each chapter, before going on to suggest instructional techniques and wider reading.

<https://www.wiley.com/en-gb/Why+Don%27t+Students+Like+School%3F%3A+A+Cognitive+Scientist+Answers+Questions+About+How+the+Mind+Works+and+What+It+Means+for+the+Classroom-p-9780470591963>

- ***Make It Stick***, Peter C. Brown, Henry L. Roediger III, Mark A. McDaniel.

<http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674729018>

Teachers' responsibilities outside their subject

It is an understatement to say that teaching is a job with different responsibilities. Giving a lesson alone involves subject knowledge, presentation skills, IT competence, managing relationships, discipline and time-keeping. Beyond the classroom, there are other responsibilities that teachers do as part of the school community.

Duties

Making sure pupils are behaving themselves in a particular area of the school (e.g. the dining hall or the playground) at break, lunch or before or after school.

Form Tutors

Sometimes called tutor groups or mentor groups. This is a time, either once or twice a day, where a tutor/form group come together. It is used as a pastoral group to ensure that pupils are doing well. Trainee teachers may be a co- or associate form tutor.

PSHE

Personal, Social and Health Education is taught to all pupils in the UK. In some schools this is done through other subjects but in many schools, it is taught in a discrete lesson, often by form tutors. This includes citizenship and sex education.

Parents Evenings

In most schools, each year group will have one parents evening a year. Sometimes in year 11 there are two. This means that all teachers who teach that year group meet with parents after school to discuss their child's progress.

Open Evenings

Most schools have open evenings for new pupils and their families to look around the school. These are usually for Year 6 pupils who will be moving to secondary education the following year and for those progressing to 6th Form. They are recruitment and promotional events.

Frequently asked questions

You will now undoubtedly have a headful of questions and we will try our best to answer them if you do want to become part of the Now Teach network. You should also read our School Experience library for a taste of what it's like to be in a secondary school and, once you apply, you will have a recruitment adviser to answer any particular questions.

In the meantime, here are some of the answers to some of the questions we get asked all the time.

What do teachers wear in UK schools?

In general, teachers in UK schools are required to wear business smart dress. This usually means a suit and tie for men and women are expected to wear smart clothes, often including a jacket. Each school will have their own dress code that staff must adhere to.

What are teachers called?

In almost all secondary schools in the UK, teachers are either called 'Sir' or 'Miss' or their title and surname (Mr Smith or Mrs Jones). In most schools, this is not an option. Teachers are very rarely called by their first name by students. When visiting a colleague's classroom, it is customary to address the teacher by Mr, Ms, Miss or Mrs and their surname within earshot of students.

What is the length of the school day in the UK?

This varies but generally it will start around 8:30 and be finished for students by around 15:30. Some schools may start later, and some may not finish lessons till a bit later. However, staff may have to be in school until later for meetings, revision sessions etc. Most teachers will be expected to be in school at least 30 minutes before the school day begins.

When are term times and holidays?

Term dates in England are quite formalised, with only slight variations. The Autumn term is September to December. The Easter term is from January to the start of April, just before Easter, and the Summer term is from mid-April after Easter to the end of July. There is then a holiday period of around six weeks before the next school year starts. During each term, there is usually a one week half-term holiday halfway through in October, February and May.

Your school website will have their specific dates on it.

One important thing to remember is that teachers cannot take holiday during term time for any reason.

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