The Education System in the UK and in the USA

1. The Education System in the UK

In the UK, former independent schools, Oxford and Cambridge alumni are overrepresented among the decision makers and top-ranking posts holders of the country. To what extent is the British education system responsible for this situation ?

1.1. The Mainstream System

Due to historic factors, the British educational system is multifaceted.

For most students, compulsory education starts at the age of 5 in primary school, although some children attend preschool between the age of 3 and 5. Secondary education caters for the needs of pupils between the age of 11 and 18.

Pupils wishing to obtain a further education after 16 usually take **GSE** (General Certificate of Education) **– Advanced Levels**, which may be delivered in sixth form colleges or high schools. To graduate for their A-Levels, students usually study 3 in year 12. **A-Levels** results are crucial for teenagers insofar as universities use them to select their applicants.

The majority of students attend state-funded schools, most of which are mixed or co-educational and operate under a comprehensive system, that is to say that these schools admit all students allocated to their area, regardless of their abilities.

Some state-funded schools can be faith schools – most of them are Church of England or Roman Catholic – taking on in priority students of their faith. Besides, since the *1944 Butler Act*, religious education is part of the curriculum in all state-funded schools, though parents may decide to withdraw their children from this class.

Nonetheless, many children attend schools which diverge from the prevailing model. There can also be variations since Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have devolved powers over education.

1. <u>An elitist system</u>

British education is often said to be based on an elitist system, because of the existence of both a private system and of selective schools within the state system.

1. Private schools

Independent schools are privately run, fee-paying institutions and are generally quite expensive, especially public schools. The latter term can be confusing for foreigners, for these schools are actually private schools.
These institutions are often hailed for their top results. Yet, their outstanding academic performance is barely surprising, considering their intake includes mostly high-achievers from the upper-middle class, though grants can be awarded to bright students from poorer backgrounds.
So as to be accepted in public schools, children usually attend from the age of 8 preparatory schools aiming to train students for the entrance exam – the Common Entrance Exam.
Many independent schools are single-sex schools and offer boarding facilities.

2. Selection in the state-funded system

Since the beginning of state-organised education in the 19th century, class overshadowed the prospects of universal education or education for all.

- The selective system

At the time of the Industrial Revolution, there was a growing need for a more educated workforce and yet, many were wary as to the risks of educating the masses. Thus, the type of schooling children were expected to receive was determined by their social class. It was the case of course for the private and independent school system, whose cost made it the preserve of the upper class through prep school. But state education was also organized alongside class

division through the endowed *Schools Act of 1869*, creating schools for the middle class and the *1870 Elementary Education Act*, which established provision for the basic education of the masses.
This class-based division was maintained during the whole 20th century in the organisation of the educational system. Indeed, the *1944 Tripartite system*, implementing the *1944 Butler Act*, set up three types of schools, to which students were supposed to the allocated on their results at the 11+ test.

- **Grammar schools**[1] became the most selective element of the tripartite system. They catered for the 25% of best performing students selected and willing to pursue a university education after their O-levels.
- **Secondary modern schools** were intended for less gifted children who would be going into the working world.
- **Technical schools** were supposed to offer training for pupils wishing to work in trades or industries. Very few were actually created.

The tripartite system did not meet with general support and its noxious effects were quickly denounced by parents as well as Labour politicians. It was accused of bolstering class division, by steering students with lower results at the 11+ towards a second-rate education.

- Comprehensive schools

In the late fifties, so-called experimental **comprehensive schools** started opening and gradually gained ground, even thought the Conservative government was reluctant.
In 1964, expectations were high as the Labour government pledged to scrap down the selective system. But despite an increase in the proportion of comprehensive schools to about 30% of children, Prime Minister Harold Wilson did not abolish the selective system altogether. Neither did he undertake to integrate independent schools, leaving Labour's pledge to get rid of social selection largely uncompleted.
Over the years, comprehensive schools became more and more widespread, while the number of grammar schools gradually fell. In 1998, Tony Blair introduced a ban on the creation of new grammar schools in an attempt to tackle inequalities.
Today there are about 160 grammar schools in England and 67 in Northern Ireland. They are often oversubscribed. As a result of their selectiveness, these schools often occupy the top of school league tables. Yet the selection process remains a wedge issue. When Prime Minister Theresa May announced in 2016 that she would lift the ban on grammar schools, in an effort to re-establish a meritocratic education system, her move was condemned by Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and some Conservative leaders alike. They indict grammar schools for entrenching social segregation instead of being engines of social mobility, since they benefit mainly children from affluent backgrounds more than disadvantaged children.
By the end of the 1980s, all grammar schools in Wales had been converted to or merged with comprehensive schools. Selection was fully abolished in 1965 in Scotland.

1.2. Alternative forms of education

In the 1980s, under Margaret Thatcher's governments, the introduction of liberal policies became all the rage in education. These free-market strategies led to the founding of academies and free schools.

- Academies

Academies are publicly-funded, self-governed bodies. In order to raise standards by means of innovative methods, they have greater freedom regarding staff, curriculum and schedule. This scheme was originally introduced in 2000 to replace poorly performing schools, which were taken over by a trust in order to drive up performance. They had to have sponsors such as businesses, church groups or private schools. They were usually set up in state-of-the-art buildings to provide students with a favourable environment. The then government was planning to eventually turn all schools into academies. Since 2010, the number of academies has grown dramatically, representing about 60% of secondary schools today. Many of these schools are specialized in a certain field, be it modern languages, technology, arts or sports. Under the Academies Act passed by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, primary, secondary and special schools rated outstanding by Ofsted[2] can also apply to become Academies today and are expected to work with underperforming schools to improve results.

In 2019 there were 5,539 primary academies in England, of which 514 were forced away from local authority control after being failed by Ofsted. The Department for Education (DfE) paid out at least £18.4m to the academy trusts taking on these schools. The parents, governors and local authorities had no say in how this money was spent or how the assets were used.

- Free schools

1The curriculum, focusing on academic subjects was inspired by the former grammar schools which had existed since Saint Augustine and which originally taught Latin and English – hence their name.
2 Ofsted is an organization which publishes every year a list of the nation's schools rated from outstanding to inadequate.

Free schools are a specific type of academy. They were introduced in 2010 as part of Michael Gove's flagship innovative policy. Like other academies, they are funded by the government but are not controlled by local authorities. They are free and non-selective and can be set up by charities, independent schools, universities, parents or teachers. Between 2010 and 2015, more than 400 free schools were opened. They have more freedom regarding curriculum, teacher's recruitment and pay and are an example of neoliberal policies in which parents and other groups are granted power to make the decisions they deem best for the education of children. The goal of this scheme is to create competition and therefore raise standards.

However critics argue that there is a lack of foresight concerning these schools. Moreover, they are accused of diverting funding from schools which need it most and leading to a surplus of school places. On top of that, a recent scandal involving Bradford free school founder, who defrauded government funding, caused an outcry.

1.3. Higher Education

British universities rank second in the 2015 global university league table, with 34 universities among the best 200 universities in the world – Oxford and Cambridge ranking respectively second and fourth.

- General information

Universities can be divided into different categories.

- ➔ The "Ancient Universities" such as Oxford, Cambridge in England, Saint Andrews or Edinburgh in Scotland and the University of Dublin in Ireland, were founded during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. For a very long time, they were the only institutions offering higher education degrees in the UK, apart from medical schools. Richly endowed, they did not depend on state funding and were generally hostile to state intervention. They were paragons of academic merit and still enjoy an excellent reputation today.
- ➔ The "red-brick universities", whose nickname is derived from the material their buildings are made of, flourished in the 19th century.
- ➔ "Plate-glass universities", thus called because of their modern architectural design, developed after the Second World War.
- ➔ Former polytechnics which offer tertiary degrees were awarded the status of universities in 1992.

Today there are about 2 million students in higher education in the UK and about half a million students from overseas.

Degrees include undergraduate programmes, Bachelor's degrees in different fields – BA : Bachelor of Arts, Bsc = Bachelor of Science – or post-graduate qualifications such as Master's degrees – MA = Master of Arts and Msc = Master of Science and Ph.Ds – Doctor of Philosophy.

Tuition at universities is divided into lectures in large lecture halls accommodating a sizable number of students, seminars in smaller groups and tutorials in every small groups for individual reviews of students' work.

Recently, thanks to new technologies, many universities have begun offering online courses, making the need for large lecture halls less acute, and thus allowing cash-strapped universities to save money. The Covid-19 pandemic has changed teaching and learning in higher education. Overnight, universities around the world have had to migrate from face-to-face engagements to online learning.

- The controversy regarding tuition fees

After the Second World War, demand for mass higher education increased in order to meet the challenges of economic development and provide equal opportunities for all. Only about 5% of young Britons attended university then and only 1 in 4 among them were women. **Higher education was therefore the preserve of a masculine elite**. As a result the *1963 Robbins Report* advocated the expansion of higher education by calling for university places to be available for "all those qualified by ability and attainment to pursue studies and who wished to do so".
That is why the state policies became incrementally connected to the issue of tuition fees. Before the expansion of higher education, maintenance grants covering up the full expense of students' tuition fees were offered. With the exponential growth in the late 20th century, the system had become unsustainable and the *Dearing report* in 1996 recommended the re-introduction of fees. The measure was enacted in 1998 by the Labour government. It established tuition fees of £1,000 but retained grants for students from underprivileged backgrounds.
The new system turned out to be insufficient to balance the precarious budget of higher education and as a consequence further reform was undertaken. In 2004, the cap for tuition fees rose to £3,000. Meanwhile grants were replaced with

loans that graduates were supposed to pay back once their income reached a certain threshold. The fees were meant to complement state funding and guarantee a satisfactory quality of teaching. Tony Blair's labour government argued that the rise was compensated by increased earnings for graduates with a university degree.
In 2010, under David Cameron's coalition government, the cap was further raised to £9,000, despite the Liberal Democrats' pledge to oppose the decision. Consequently, tens of thousands of students took to the streets to protest this hike. The plan had raised concern that students from underprivileged backgrounds may give up on higher education, for fear of ending up in the red and without any guarantee that their college degree would protect them from unemployment and bankruptcy. But the protests were to no avail.

- The prospects for higher education in the upcoming years

In 2016, the Conservative government approved a raise in the cap to £9,250 for the best-performing universities, in line with inflation. Most universities in England announced they would implement it in 2017. Opponents think another hike will foster a two-tier system, with low-cost universities being the only option for students from the lower class.
Since 2010, several Labour politicians have called for the introduction of a 1or 2% graduate tax paid by graduates on their salary – above £15,000 – after graduation. The purpose of this tax would be to guarantee that the best-paid graduates contribute most to the funding of higher education. Yet several problems arise from the implementation of such a plan, for instance, how would the government ensure students who work abroad after their studies pay the tax?
Alternatively, higher education could be funded through general taxation but some object to the strategy, claiming it would be unfair because the poor usually do not derive much benefit from higher education, unlike the wealthiest swathe of the population.

- Local variations

With education being a devolved matter, the situation is slightly different in other parts of the UK.
Wales currently applies the same caps as England but grants of up to £5,200 are available as well as loans. In Northern Ireland, the cap is lower - £3,805 – while since 2008 higher education had been free for "young students normally residing in Scotland." There have been concerns that this might overstretch the Scottish budget, as students from England might be tempted to take advantage of the more generous Scottish system by moving to Scotland.
As a consequence of Brexit and in keeping with Scotland's desire to move closer to the European Union, the Scottish Education Secretary announced that EU students applying in the country's universities would be exempted from tuition fees until 2018. The policy ended in the summer of 2020.

Adapté de *Substance and Style, 27 étapes de civilisation et expression en anglais*, coord.Fabien Fichaux, Ellipses 2018.

Further reading :

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https://www.theguardian.com/money/2017/jun/15/uk-student-loan-debt-soars-to-more-than-100bn

https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/jul/11/student-debt-graduates-tuition-fees

https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-51190779

2. The Education System in the USA

2.1. A state and local prerogative

It is difficult to discuss the American educational system, because no single system or regulatory agency exists – authority for deciding who learns what and under what circumstances resides in quite a number of administrative and governmental bodies. Although its basic structure is a little bit like the French structure, its underlying philosophy and federal character have given it certain specificities.

1. The federal Department of Education's role

What happens in the classroom can vary a lot from one state to the next. Although there is a federal *Department of Education*, the federal government actually has limited input into educational content. As the *Department of Education* states on its website, "Education is primarily a State and local responsibility in the United States. It is States and communities, as well as public and private organizations of all kinds, that establish schools and colleges, develop

curricula, and determine requirements for enrollment and graduation." The Department's function is to identify weaknesses and inequalities in state programs. In the past, this has included mandating equal opportunities for girls, children of colour, and people with physical or learning disabilities. It has little input on the actual content, leaving states and communities to decide for themselves what is "appropriate". Some school districts, for example, forbid the teaching of evolution because legislators there feel that doing so might undermine parents' religious values.

2. Opposition between federal government and state

The federal government is only responsible for about 8% of the educational operating budgets, the rest being the responsibility of the state and local authorities. This causes conflict when what the government mandates requires financial outlay. The *No Child Left Behind Act*, passed under President George W.Bush, is a case in point. The object of the Act was to force schools to find ways to keep children from failing academically. While all would agree that the goal was desirable given the high number of underachieving students, many school systems objected because assessment of a school's ability was based on regularly giving children a number of standardized tests. Such tests are costly to administer and it was the job of the schools to fund the testing, in some places forcing other programs to be scrapped to pay for the tests. Others also objected that such standardized assessment tools may not accurately judge student learning; schools changing their programs to "teach the test" might score well by federal standards but push students and teachers into monotonous, narrow pedagogical environments. Since 2009 and at the behest of a group of state governors, the *Common Core Standards Initiative* was created to identify what students should be learning (thus focusing on content rather than outcomes) at every level from kindergarten through high school in math and English. As of 2014, the Common Core had been adopted by 44 states.

3. American specificities

One of the objectives of schools is to instill in young people a sense of national identity as well as to inculcate a common body of knowledge. But in American schools the sharing of certain civic values, and the development of the individual have traditionally been almost as important as actual academic work. Many schools begin the day by reciting the *Pledge of Allegiance*, an oath of loyalty to the values of the Republic (including the phrase "one nation under God") said with one's hand over one's heart while facing the American flag found in every classroom. In a nation founded on immigration, these rituals are thought to provide a uniting sense of patriotic identity.

Many kinds of activities, particularly sports and artistic and cultural activities are incorporated into educational life. Larger high schools may offer photography, theater and music performance classes, and even small junior high and high schools have their football or basketball teams. These may be completed by a range of after-school activities or clubs. All of these are considered a very valuable part of a young person's personal development, they allow the individual to discover individual capacities and talents and acquire both team-building and leadership skills. In many areas, such activities are being reduced considerably for budget reasons, either to free up funds to reduce class sizes or to reduced insurance premiums.

2.2. Private education and home schooling

1. An increasingly popular option

Private education is more and more chosen by parents who fear that the educational environment at their local public school is inadequate; reasons cited include insufficient facilities, below-average academic achievement, poor discipline, or student violence. Nearly a quarter of all primary and secondary schools in the USA are private, and about 11% of American pupils attend them. Some of these are extremely prestigious and have been educating the country's elite for over 200 years. Many private schools are religious, another incentive for families objecting to the secular nature of public education. 85% of private schools students attend such institutions, half of them at Catholic schools.

2. The price of private education

Students at private schools must pay tuition, in contrast with those at public schools (which are free), but that distinction is becoming blurred : in some areas of the country, parents may choose to take state funds in the form of a voucher, and use it for tuition at the school of their choice, religious or secular. The *Supreme Court* has ruled that vouchers do not violate the separation of church and state, and some parents like the idea of being able to pay for their school of choice with their tax dollar. For others, the removal of money from the state system only weakens it, making it more difficult to solve the problems that parents objected to in the first place.

3. Charter schools

Since the 1990s, some public school systems have tried to compensate for parental dissatisfaction by allowing the establishment of "charter schools." Charter schools are independent, nonsectarian public schools which operate by contract with the state or local educational authority and are largely free of state regulation and restrictions. They must be open to all students and may not charge tuition, so their budgets depend on enrollments : if they are seen as successful, they attract students and thus funding. But if they appear to falter, students enroll elsewhere and funding is cut. Some students have found the charter school experience satisfying as they feel such schools allow for more

flexibility, the private, market-driven nature of the schools has however, meant that students have been faced with sudden school closures when enrollment dropped, and lack of financial oversight has created problems elsewhere. Furthermore, charter school students have not been shown to perform better on standardized tests.

4. Home schooling

Other parents have chosen to remove their children from organized education entirely, choosing to "home school" them (i.e., teach their children themselves at home). Legislation on this topic varies considerably from state to state, but it is estimated that some two million elementary and secondary-school age children are being taught outside educational systems in any given year. While critics worry that home-schooled children are not benefiting from the social interaction with people of different backgrounds and from the values that public schools provide, supporters of home-schooling cite research demonstrating that home schooled children routinely perform better on average on standardized test for reading and math and have fewer behavioral problems than publicly-educated children do.

2.3. Higher Education

1. Selection

The wide range of educational situations complicates matters for the country's colleges and universities as they try to assess applicants for their institutions. Many institutions of higher education in the United States require applicants to prepare an admission dossier to be assessed on a case-by-case basis. This can include a high school diploma or equivalent, a transcript, a writing sample, letters of recommendation from teachers, employers or members of the community, and the results of a standardized university entrance test (called ***SAT Reasoning test*** since 2005); students may also be required to have an interview with a university admissions counselor.

2. Community Colleges

Higher education takes a variety of forms, ranging from the very accessible to the very elite. The least selective institutions are community colleges, institutions which offer primarily vocational education, but which may also have academic programs. Students completing the two-year course of study at a junior college receive an Associate's Degree (abbreviated A.A.) Community colleges may offer both two-year and the more widely recognized 4-year diploma, the Bachelor's degree, or B.A. They represent 1/3 of American institutions of higher education and enroll almost half of all minority graduates. The average student age is 29, and this type of institution is particularly suited to working and older people, who may attend classes either full- or part-time.

3. Private and public colleges and universities

The 2009 financial crisis has, however, caused all institutions, even the most modest, to raise tuition significantly, calling into question these schools' historic function as a way out of poverty and the working class.

The B.A may also be obtained at elite private colleges and research universities and at public (state) universities, all of which are non-profit institutions. The former are the most selective but also the most expensive, with total costs for one year averaging 27,000 euros and going up to 44,000euros per year (public universities typically cost €13,000 to €14,000 per year.

4. the for-profit sector

The for-profit sector has grown dramatically in recent years, a market-driven response to increasingly available federal student-loans. These institutions tend to attract low-income students whose profiles do not fit with community colleges and public universities. They also charge much higher fees and tuition and have a much lower graduation rate. Thus poor, less-qualified students enroll in for-profit programs for which they take out huge loans and which they do not finish. Indeed, students at all types of colleges and universities often leave school with massive debts that cripple them economically for decades to come and sometimes even force them into bankruptcy.

Adapté de *Fiches de civilisation américaine et britannique* (3ème édition), Fabien Fichaux, Cécile Loubignac, Claude Loubignac et Linda Martz, Optimum, Ellipses, 2015.

Further reading about student debt :

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https://www.cnbc.com/2020/06/12/how-student-debt-became-a-1point6-trillion-crisis.html

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https://www.businessinsider.com/student-loan-debt-crisis-college-cost-mind-blowing-facts-2019-7?IR=T

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