

## Country Report: United Kingdom (England)

Toby Bownass, Harrow School

tab@harrowschool.org.uk

### Introduction

The policy of devolution was set in law in the Scotland Act 1998, the Government of Wales Act 1998 and the Northern Ireland Act 1998. This granted powers of self-governance to the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish governments, removed from the Westminster government, on matters such as health, social services, and of interest here, on education.

As a result of devolution, the education systems in the four nations are different. Differences may pertain to the age students start following the national curriculum, what the national curriculum includes, public exam bodies, and ages of compulsory school attendance. As such, this country report will focus on philosophy in schools in England. Isolating data solely to England, however, will not always be possible, for example concerning the numbers of students taking A Level Philosophy which is taken in all nations.

### Education in England

In England education by schooling is compulsory from the age of 5 until 16 after which you may start an apprenticeship, go to college, or spend 20 hours or more per week working or volunteering alongside part-time education or training. The years of compulsory education are split into primary and secondary education, where primary education begins at the age of 5 and continues until age 11 (divided into Key Stages 1 and 2) and secondary beginning age 11 until age 16 (Key stage 3). Although children may then leave school, they may continue to attend schools and colleges until they are 18 (Key stage 4). During these years, students will sit three national examinations: the Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) at the end of Key Stage 2 in Mathematics and English reading, grammar, punctuation and spelling; the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) at the end of Key Stage 3; and finally at the end of Key Stage 4, students may sit A-Level examinations, T-Levels (focusing on vocational skills), the International Baccalaureate (IB), or Pre-University (Pre-U).

In 2023, 643,095 students sat GCSE exams. The majority (69%) of students took between 7 to 9 GCSE subjects with English, Mathematics and Science being compulsory. Of the examination options in Key Stage 4, A-Levels are the most popular with 279,700 students sitting them in 2023. For comparison, in the same year, 3,448 students took T-Levels and 4,850 students took the IB (numbers of Pre-U students are not available). For the A-Level examinations students may choose what subjects they take; none are compulsory. They will be limited in their choice to subjects their school offers. Schools will likely offer the subjects on the national curriculum and those available



at GCSE study, as they already have the teachers specialised in those subjects, subjects which only exist at A Level, however, need not be offered.

The GCSE and A-Level exams (and T-Levels) are overseen by *The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation* (Ofqual) and run by various exam boards (AQA, OCR, WJEC Eduqas, and Pearson).

Schools in England are either state-maintained or privately run independent schools. There are many types of state-maintained schools, the majority being faith schools, academies, and local authority-maintained schools. Faith schools follow the national curriculum but can choose what they teach in Religious Education (RE). Nearly one third of all schools in the U.K are faith schools, the majority of these being Church of England primary schools. Academies, while funded by the government, are not under local authority control. These schools have more freedom over staff pay, the curriculum and their finances than their local authority-maintained counterparts. The number of academies has nearly doubled from 2015 to some 10,000 schools, while the number of local-authority schools has fallen by half in the same period. The number of independent schools has remained steady in recent years. They are not funded by the government and so are free to run themselves (they are still inspected by a government approved inspectorate). While they require fees to attend, these fees are not levy to VAT and the schools are registered charities.

### **Philosophy in schools in England**

Philosophy does not exist as a subject on the national curriculum in England, as there is no legal requirement for it to be taught at any of the four key stages. Religious Education, however, is taught throughout the key stages. While religious education also does not appear on the national curriculum, the 1998 School Standards and Framework Act does require state-maintained schools to provide RE for all students of all religions until the age of 18, meaning that even if a student opts not to take the subject for GCSE or A-Level, the school still has to teach them RE, unless their parent withdraws them from RE, which is their right. While RE is a statutory requirement, Ofsted (the government inspectorate for education and childcare) found that non-examined RE (non-GCSE and A-Level RE courses) was “limited and of a poor quality” and that many schools do not meet the statutory requirement to teach the subject (Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills, 2024). In lieu of any direction from the national curriculum, RE is directed by a locally agreed syllabus (LAs) which must reflect that the main religious tradition of Great Britain is Christianity. The local authority, through a committee of faith leaders, teachers and local councilors, agrees on the syllabus for their county. As such the teaching of RE varies across the country.

However, LAs have included philosophy in their syllabi. For example, the Norfolk LAs understands RE as a multi-disciplinary subject with three core disciplinary fields: theology, human/social sciences, and philosophy. As such, philosophy will be found in the teaching of RE in many schools within this county. (This is reflected in many departments incorporating philosophy and/or ethics into their names: e.g., the department of religion, philosophy and ethics,

of theology and philosophy, of religion and philosophy.) The LAs does not stipulate what teachers must teach, but rather offers guidelines. Therefore, the content of philosophy that students learn may vary.

There is no philosophy GCSE for students to take as a qualification. There is, however, Religious Studies GCSE (RS) which contains some philosophy. Philosophy topics covered in the GCSE are predominantly arguments for and against the existence of God, including cosmological and teleological arguments, as well as the problem of evil.

While GCSE RS takes a light touch to philosophy the A-Level RS goes into more detail. Each A-Level specification comprises three to four topics, two of which are Philosophy of Religion and Ethics of Religion, the others being theology based. These topics comprise a wide range of philosophers and philosophical arguments, though all are related to the study of religion. For example, students may well study Wittgenstein, but they will then apply his work to religious language. Similarly, students could study Hume, but only concerning miracles. The study of ethics diverges somewhat from applications to religion, for example students typically study Aristotelian ethics and utilitarianism from Bentham and Mill without reference to religion, as well as Kant. While the RS public exams contain philosophy content, the number of students taking these subjects is decreasing. Within five years, the number of students taking GCSE RS has decreased some 5%, while at the same time the number of students taking A-Level RS has decreased by 14%.

There is, however, a Philosophy A-Level offered by one exam board, AQA. In this A Level, students study four topics. As with the RS A-Level they study Philosophy of Religion and Philosophy of Ethics, as well as Metaphysics of Mind, which takes students from Cartesian dualism to functionalism, and Epistemology, which covers topics from the tripartite definition of knowledge to sense data, rationalism/empiricism and skepticism. Although the number of students taking the philosophy A-Level are small compared to the RS A-Level (in 2023: 3835 and 14690 respectively) there was a 36% increase in the same time period that RS saw a 14% decrease.

While philosophy is not a part of the national curriculum and therefore not required to be taught at the primary level, many schools engage in Philosophy for Children (P4C). As many primary school teachers are not philosophy specialists, P4C is often done through charities such as the Society for the Advancement of Philosophical Enquiry (SAPERRE) and The Philosophy Foundation. The aims of P4C aren't to teach philosophy per se, but to enable "students to think with others and to think for themselves" (Society for the Advancement of Philosophical Enquiry and Reflection in Education, 2024).

Philosophy is not widely taught in English schools, but as the country grows more secular, there is an increasing appetite for it, especially since interest in Religious Studies seems to be falling.

## **References**

- Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. (2024). *Deep and meaningful? The religious education subject report* (Subject Report Series: Religious Education) [Research and Analysis]. Ofsted. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/subject-report-series-religious-education/deep-and-meaningful-the-religious-education-subject-report>
- Society for the Advancement of Philosophical Enquiry and Reflection in Education. (2024). *What is 'P4C'? P4C is an approach to teaching and learning that explores the big ideas that arise in all areas of education and life experience*. SAPERE. <https://www.sapere.org.uk/what-is-p4c/>