

The application of the ISCED-97 to the UK's educational qualifications

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1 General features and dimensions of differentiation of the UK's educational system

This chapter covers the basic features of the educational systems of the UK and the application of the ISCED-97 to the British qualifications. More detailed information is available from Eurydice/Eurybase (European Commission, 2007a, 2007b).

The UK's educational system is highly differentiated and changed substantially over the last century. Education is highly politicised in the UK and thus also very visible in the media. The educational system is under constant pressure to perform. Thus, education in the UK very much looks like a political battlefield.

There are only few general features to the UK's educational system: Basically, there is free state education up to the upper secondary level. Nowadays education is compulsory up to age 16, when the first formal educational certificate can be achieved, and university entrance qualifications are – on the standard path – acquired at age 18. However, home schooling is legal. Moreover, grade retention is not practised in the UK. Otherwise, there is substantial differentiation between the constituent countries of the UK, and there is even some differentiation within England, e.g. the Isle of Wight and some other counties' educational structures diverge from those in the rest of England. Apart from that, England and Wales' (EN and WS) educational systems are basically the same (although there are some signs of devolution, which might increase in the future). Northern Ireland (NI) is relatively close to EN and WS. Scotland (SC) differs most clearly from the other three countries.

There are four main dimensions of differentiation, which do not only apply to the different countries, but also to change over time:

1. Educational institutions belong to different sectors of the educational system in terms of financing: there are state-funded state schools, privately funded independent schools, and mixed institutions (combined state and private funding). The importance of private education differs over the constituent countries and is biggest in the greater London area.
2. The different levels of education (primary, secondary, tertiary) and the corresponding typical ages of transition between these levels do not overlap perfectly between the four countries (e.g. compulsory education does not start at the same age) and between the different sectors.

3. Within these levels, different institutions offer “equivalent” educational programmes in the four countries. Although compulsory schooling in state schools is largely organised in a comprehensive way, there are numerous exceptions (e.g. NI) and tracking within schools.
4. Finally, the direct outcomes of schooling differ between EN, WS and NI on the one hand and SC on the other hand, which means different examinations, qualifications and credentials. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) provides a framework indicating the equivalence of different qualifications within the UK. (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2007)

State (i.e. publicly-funded) schools are financed through tax and are free of charge. At the national level, education fell in the responsibility of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) until June 2007; since then, two Departments share this responsibility: The Department for Children, Schools and Families and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills. At the county level, the school system is administered by the Local Education Authorities (LEAs) of the local council. In the state sector, only specialist schools (specialising e.g. in technology, languages, sports etc.) can select maximally 10% of their pupils on aptitude of the respective specialism. State specialist schools, which currently only exist in EN (with a pilot running in NI), are widely debated at present. SC rejected plans for their introduction.

Nearly a third of all state schools are church schools; these are mainly primary schools and get additional funding from the Church of England (other churches are much less involved in education). In NI, there is a high degree of segregation between protestant and catholic schools. In SC, church schools play a minor role only, as schools linked to the Church of Scotland were transformed to secular state schools in the late 19th century.

Independent, privately funded schools are financed through fees, with bursaries available for some pupils. Traditional independent schools can freely choose all their pupils, and they are often academically selective.¹ Quite often, independent schools are boarding schools. At the primary level, about 5%, and at the secondary level, 8 to 10% of the student population go to independent schools (Husen, 2001). Up to the end of compulsory education, state and independent schools are differently organized, even within countries (age structure etc.), and the independent sector is largely unaffected by educational reform acts. Only some of the private-independent schools are catholic.

Finally, there are some more recent, non-fee paying independent upper secondary schools, namely City Technology Colleges, CTC, and (City) Academies. These are

¹ Some traditional independent schools are called “public schools”, which can lead to some confusion. Thus, the terminology of state and independent schools will be preferred to “public” and “private” schools.

privately sponsored, but mostly publicly funded (the “mixed” school type mentioned above), and independent from the LEAs. Although they are thus considered nominally independent schools, they do not charge any fees. Private money here comes through sponsoring, either by charities, private individuals or companies.

The parallel existence of state and private education as well as the persistence of grammar schools in some areas and the increase in state specialist schools somewhat undermine the “comprehensiveness” of the UK's educational system, especially in England, where most independent schools are located.

2 Major educational reforms since 1944

Since the 1944 Education (or “Butler”) Act in EN and WS, secondary education is free for all pupils in state schools (Husen, 2001). From 1944 up to the mid-1960s, state secondary education was organised in the “tripartite system” in most of the UK. Pupils were selected into three different school tracks through the “11 plus exam”. In *grammar schools*, an academic curriculum was taught, which prepared for University, the professions and white-collar work. Grammar schools prepared for the General Certificate of Education Ordinary and Advanced Levels (in short: GCE O- and A-Levels). *Secondary modern schools* provided only basic education until the minimum school leaving age (age 15 at that time). Initially, they did not award any school leaving certificates, and later on the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE). This certificate only gave access to low-level jobs. *Secondary technical schools* provided a rather vocational education, which prepared for skilled work in the manufacturing industry. However, these schools only operated in about three fifths of local education authorities, so that the other two fifths had a binary system of grammar schools and secondary moderns. Thus, less than 10% of the student population attended technical schools (Heath, 2003). This tripartite system was highly stratified by ability and social class.

From 1965 onwards, secondary education was gradually transformed to a comprehensive system, with comprehensive high schools for all pupils (Husen, 2001). At first, whole classes were streamed, whereas nowadays, ability grouping takes place per subject rather than class. In the current comprehensive system, students are thus usually banded *within* schools. However, NI kept the selective (tripartite) system until today, as did some local education authorities in EN. Some other local education authorities kept a few highly elite grammar schools alongside comprehensives. Church schools continue to select pupils, and independent schools remained largely unchanged, despite schemes to open them up for talented pupils from low-income families, like e.g. the “assisted places scheme” (now abolished). In contrast, in rural areas of SC and WS, comprehensive schools had been established long before 1965. In the birth cohort 1960 to 1969 (who were in secondary school between 1971 to 1984), around 65% attended comprehensive schools. Around 20%

were educated in secondary modern schools, only 1% in technical schools, and the other 13% were split over independent schools (6% for men, 4% for women) and grammar schools (7% for men, 9% for women; before comprehensivisation, grammar schools had made up about 20% of the student population). This means that in the 1980s, a third of pupils were de facto still educated in the tripartite system and the private sector (Heath, 2003).²

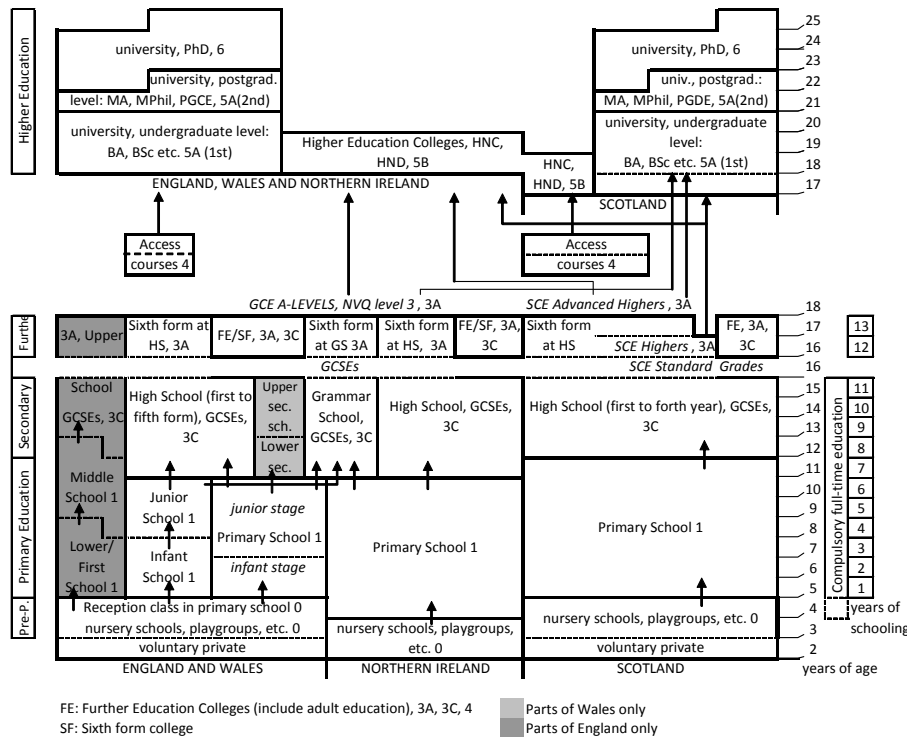
Since the 1988 Education Reform act, parents have a right to choose a school for their child. As school level examination results are published, the so-called league tables are an important source of information for school choice, with a number of unintended consequences. Aspects of parental choice and education suited to the interests and abilities of the individual pupil are throughout emphasised, and the idea of “neighbourhood comprehensives” is slowly abandoned (see also the development of specialised schools). Furthermore, the 1988 Education Act introduced a National Curriculum for EN and WS and changed the structure of the first school-leaving qualification (see below). Finally, it also changed school administration in important ways, effectively reducing the power of the LEAs.

In 1947, the minimum school leaving age was raised to 15, leading to a further step of educational expansion. In 1972 it was raised again, to age 16. There are new proposals to make education compulsory until age 18, which would include general and vocational education.

² However, there is a discrepancy as compared to the official data (respondents maybe reported the schools’ original status, although they actually were in a comprehensive school; Heath, 2003).

3 Educational levels, institutions and qualifications in the UK

Figure 1. The educational system of the UK



3.1 Pre-primary and primary education

Pre-primary education in the UK in the sense of ISCED Level 0 is split over pre-school arrangements and primary school. Compulsory schooling starts at age five in EN, WS and SC, but at age four in NI. Before children enter primary school, there are nursery schools (partly) under the authority of the Ministry of Education (age 3–5; NI: 2–4). But there are also voluntary/private settings for pre-school education, like day nurseries, pre-school groups and playgroups (age 2–5). Part-time pre-primary education is free for three- to four-year-olds, but additional childcare has to be paid for privately. At age 4, children start going to primary school (Year 0 or “Reception”). This is the first year of compulsory primary education in NI, but before the age of five, primary school attendance throughout the UK is classified as ISCED 0.

Primary education lasts six years in EN and WS and seven years in NI and SC (EN & WS: age 5–11; NI: 4–11; SC: 5–12). In some areas of EN and WS, there is a system of infant schools (age 4 or 5–7), followed by junior schools (age 7–11). In other areas in EN, there is a system of lower/first schools (age 4 or 5–8/9), followed by middle schools (age 8–12 or 9–13). In some areas of EN and in NI, the “11 plus exam” at the end of year 6 (NI: 7) is used to stream pupils, which is a relic of the old “Tripartite system”. This will be phased out in NI in 2008. All primary education in the UK apart from the first year in NI is coded ISCED 1, and the differences between the constituent countries are not referred to in the OECD manual (see OECD, 1999: 112). When measuring educational attainment, individuals who have not completed primary school will be coded ISCED 0. All individuals without formal qualifications, who left school after the age of 11, but before finishing lower secondary/compulsory education, are coded as ISCED 1.

3.2 Secondary education

Lower secondary education in the terminology of the ISCED-97 corresponds to secondary education in the British terminology. The terms “lower secondary” and “upper secondary” education are hardly used in the UK; the level corresponding to upper secondary education is referred to as “further education”. The lower secondary level also used to be called “first to fifth form” (years 7 to 11 or age 11 to 16), and the upper secondary level “sixth form” (lower sixth: year 12/age 17, upper sixth: year 13/age 18).

In all parts of the UK, the prevailing institution at the lower and upper secondary level nowadays is the comprehensive high school, which caters for pupils from age 11 to 16 or 18 (SC: 12–16 or 18), with the last two years offering upper secondary education. Some high schools have “specialist school” status (see section 1). In some parts of EN and in NI, there are also grammar schools (age 11 to 18) left over from the old tripartite system, so that even the state education system as a whole is not strictly comprehensive. In WS, there is an alternative structure of “lower secondary” (age 11–13) and “upper secondary” schools (age 13–16), and in those counties in EN where primary education is organised in lower and middle schools, there are also upper schools (age 13–18), which integrate lower and upper secondary education.

At the end of year 11 (fifth form, at age 16), in EN, WS and NI, pupils can sit examinations for the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), graded from A* (best) to G (worst) and U (fail, unclassified) in each subject studied. Preparation for these exams starts at age 14 and thus lasts two years. Pupils can choose in which subjects to take the exams, and there is no regulation of a minimum number of subjects in the GCSE. GCSEs are usually differentiated into grades A to C and grades D to G, and instruction in high school takes place in two or even three bands or sets

in many subjects, preparing for different levels of GCSE. This means that the transformation into a comprehensive system was not total, as within-school tracking for different ability groups persists. These ability groups are however more flexibly organised and permeable than the previous different school types. GCSEs were introduced by the 1988 Education Act and substituted the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE), which was introduced at secondary modern schools in 1965, and the General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level (GCE O-Level), which was introduced at grammar schools in 1951 (replacing the School Certificate). Thus, there was considerable change over time in the precise nature of these general lower secondary qualifications, so that they are not equivalent in an exact sense. School Certificates and GCE O-Levels were and GCSEs grades A to C are considerably more demanding than CSEs and GCSE grades D to G, and one O-Level pass or one GCSE grade C is considered to be equivalent to a grade 1 pass at CSE. The Scottish equivalent of GCSEs is the Scottish Certificate of Education (SCE) Standard Grades. They replaced SCE O-Grade in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and are taken in the fourth year of secondary education (thus also at age 16).

The OECD table on how to code the UK's educational qualifications into ISCED-97 (OECD, 1999: 112) classifies GCSEs as ISCED 3C general, but EUROSTAT distinguishes between "ISCED 3C general long" for GCSEs grades A to C, and "ISCED 3C general short" for grades D to G. Neither documentation includes "outdated" educational qualifications. Thus, as School Certificate, CSE and GCE O-Levels are considered to be at least roughly equivalent, all would be coded as ISCED 3C (general), and following EUROSTAT, O-Levels and the School Certificate would have to be coded as "3C long" and CSE as "3C short". To sum up, within ISCED 3C, there is much differentiation, over time and over grades of GCSEs as well as between SC and the rest of the UK.

At the age of 16, pupils can decide either to enter further (upper secondary) education or the labour market. In terms of general education at upper secondary level, in EN and WS, there are Sixth Form Colleges in addition to the sixth form in high, grammar or upper schools, which offer a broader range of A-Level courses for 16- to 18-year-olds. In SC, all general upper secondary education is integrated in high schools. In the whole of the UK, there are also Further Education Colleges, which offer more vocational qualifications as well as GCSEs for people who either did not achieve GCSEs at the end of lower secondary education or who want to improve their results in order to find better subsequent opportunities ("resits").

In EN, WS and NI, in order to continue to general upper secondary education, five GCSEs with at least grade C (usually English, Maths, Science and two other subjects) are often required, but unlike many other European countries, there is no strict regulation of access to upper secondary education: Further education institutions often decide on a pupil's admission on an individual basis, which is one sign of the low degree of credentialism typical for the UK. The low degree of selectivity might

also be one of the reasons why many (particularly vocational) educational qualifications do not have a high reputation with employers.

At the end of year 12 (lower sixth form), pupils take the General Certificate of Education Advanced Subsidiary level (GCE AS level) examinations, which were introduced in 1987. This is today a requirement for continuation to the General Certificate of Education Advanced & Extension Award (GCE A level), which is taken in year 13 (upper sixth form, age 18). At least two A-Levels (i.e. A-Levels in at least two subjects) are usually required for university entry, although there are differences between universities (see below). Most pupils take between two and four A-Levels. The AS-Level is meant to broaden the range of individually chosen subjects, and requires less work than A-Levels. A-Levels were introduced in 1951, and have hardly changed since then. Independent schools in the UK increasingly offer the International Baccalaureate Diploma (IBD). In SC, pupils take the Higher Grade ("Highers") in years 12 and 13 and the Advanced Higher Grade ("Advanced Highers", formerly "Certificate of Sixth Year Studies") in year 13. Highers give access to most subjects at Scottish Universities (where first degrees take one year longer), whereas Advanced Highers are necessary for taking up studies in England and specific subjects at Scottish Universities (e.g. Law and Medicine). AS-Levels, A-Levels, Highers, Advanced Highers and IBD are coded as ISCED Level 3A (general).

For individuals who did not take A-Levels using the standard path, there are access courses of one or two years at Adult Education Centres and Further and Higher Education Institutions throughout the UK. These programmes are especially aimed at students from non-traditional backgrounds. They are intended to prepare students without sufficient formal qualifications for undergraduate studies at a university. Access courses are coded as ISCED 4A (general).

3.3 Vocational qualifications in the UK

Vocational education does not have a strong tradition in the UK. Many young people enter the labour market without any formal vocational skills, so that basic vocational training takes place "on the job". Vocational training is also not very formalised in the UK, so that many institutions awarded a large number of different qualifications, often with dubious standards. Following government initiatives to change this, the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) was established in 1986 in order to work out a National Qualification Framework (NQF) and to monitor standards in vocational training. It was merged with the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA) in 1997 to form the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) (there are similar institutions for WS, NI and SC).

Nowadays, some secondary schools already offer vocational courses to 14- to 16-year-olds. Often vocational courses can be studied alongside GCSEs or A-Levels (e.g. GNVQs, see above). Most vocational education however takes place at further

education colleges after age 16 and some even at universities, leading to diverse vocational qualifications at different levels. Most vocational qualifications are offered in a modular structure, consisting of different "units of competence", which a candidate collects over a longer period of time (Brauns and Steinmann, 1999).

The many vocational qualifications, most of which prepare for specific occupations, are assigned to five levels of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs, introduced in 1988) and Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQ). Both are very similar. These frameworks are supposed to indicate the "equivalence" of vocational qualifications with general/academic qualifications, and reflect the level of skills acquired.

General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) at Foundation, Intermediate and Advanced levels were introduced as a kind of bridge between the general qualifications (GCSEs and A-Levels) and NVQs, and are offered at High Schools and further education colleges. They cover a broader set of skills than NVQs, but unlike GCSEs and A-Levels, they are also organised in a modular structure. Introduced in 1991, they are currently being withdrawn. In turn, new specialised diplomas that will combine general and vocational education for 14- to 19-year-olds will be introduced until 2010.

Table 1 gives an overview over NVQ/SVQ levels and the respective qualifications (as given in the classifications manual of the quarterly Labour Force Survey, Office for National Statistics, 2006: 94f.) and the corresponding levels of the ISCED-97 as given in the OECD manual (OECD, 1999: 112). As there are too many different vocational qualifications, they cannot be described here in any more detail. Also, many of the single qualifications are not covered in the OECD manual and can only be broadly assigned to an ISCED level through the NVQ/SVQ level they belong to.

Table 1. Vocational qualifications in the UK and their ISCED-97 levels

| NVQ/SVQ combined (ONS) | ISCED-97 (OECD) |
|--|---|
| Level 1 (Foundation level) equivalent to GCSE at D-G grades (EN/WS/NI)/Foundation and General standard grade (SC): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – GNVQ, GSVQ foundation level (age 15) – BTEC^a first or general certificate – SCOTVEC^b first or general certificate – SCOTVEC modules – RSA^c other – City & Guilds^d, other – YT, YTP^e certificate – Key Skills – Basic Skills – Entry Level | ISCED 3C (pre-vocational/ vocational) |
| Level 2 (Intermediate), equivalent to 5 or more GCSEs at A-C grades (EN/WS/NI)/credit standard grade (SC) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – GNVQ, GSVQ intermediate level (age 16) – RSA diploma – City and Guilds, Craft – BTEC first or general diploma – SCOTVEC first or general diploma – Trade Apprenticeship | ISCED 3C (vocational) |
| Level 3 (Advanced), equivalent to 2 or more A levels (EN/WS/NI)/3 or more Highers (SC) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – GNVQ, advanced level (age 18) – RSA advanced diploma or certificate – OND, ONC, BTEC national diploma, certificate and award – SCOTVEC full national certificate – City and Guilds Advanced Craft – Higher national qualification or equivalent (SC) | ISCED 3A (vocational) |
| Level 4 (equivalent to first degree) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – BTEC Higher National Certificate (HNC), Higher National Diploma (HND), professional diplomas etc. – SCOTVEC higher level – Foundation degree – Diploma in higher education (incl. Nursing) – RSA higher diploma – City and Guilds Licentiate (LCGI) | ISCED 5B |
| Level 5: (equivalent to higher degrees) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – BTEC Advanced professional diplomas, certificates etc. – City and Guilds Graduateship (GCGI) | ISCED 5B |

Notes:

^a BTEC stands for the Business & Technology Education Council, which awarded many sub-degree qualifications in the UK, particularly at the former polytechnics, in the areas of industry, administration and commerce. In 1996, it merged with the University of London Examinations & Assessment Council (ULEAC) to form Edexcel.

^b SCOTVEC refers to the Scottish Vocational Education Council, which merged with the Scottish Examination Board (SEB) to form the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) in 1998. Unlike in EN, the awarding and accrediting body is the same in SC.

^c RSA stands for the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, whose examination board, today merged with the OCR examination board (OCR standing for Oxford, Cambridge and RSA), awards qualifications in business studies, office and commercial work, information technology and languages.

^d The City and Guilds of London Institute awards vocational qualifications mainly related to the crafts, but also in engineering, health and social care, catering and others, but also degree-level qualifications.

^e The Youth Training Scheme, later changed to Youth Training, was introduced to counter the drop in apprenticeships. It first took one, later two years, and is aimed at lower secondary graduates, and is basically an on-the-job training course.

Source: Office for National Statistics, 2006: 94f; OECD, 1999.

3.4 Universities and academic degrees in the UK

Before the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, the UK had a binary system of higher education, consisting of polytechnics (and higher education colleges) and universities. In 1992, the polytechnics as well as a number of colleges of higher education and other institutions gained university status. Today, basically five types of universities can be distinguished, in descending order of prestige: seven ancient universities (founded up to the 16th century), namely Oxford, Cambridge, Aberdeen, Glasgow, St Andrews and Edinburgh; a number of so-called "red-brick universities" (founded in the 19th century and up to WWII), e.g. the Universities of Manchester, Bristol, Leeds, Birmingham, Liverpool, Sheffield, UCL, Reading, Cardiff, Nottingham, Swansea, Newcastle, Belfast and others; the so-called "plate glass universities" (about 20, founded in the 1960s); the Open University (founded 1969, for part-time, distant learning), which does not have any entry requirements for first degrees; and lastly, the post-1992 universities (about 40), e.g. University of Brighton, Oxford Brookes University. UK's universities have formed four groups, lobbying for somewhat different higher education policies. Twenty large research-oriented universities collaborate as the "Russell Group" in order to represent their interests and distinguish themselves from the post-1992 universities, which in turn formed the "Campaign for Mainstream Universities" (31 members). 19 smaller research-oriented universities formed the "1994 Group", also as a reaction to the formation of the Russell Group. Finally, the "University Alliance" (previously "Alliance of Non-

Aligned Universities”) consists of 22 pre- and post-1992 institutions, which stress their balance of teaching and research.

Until 1998, higher education was free in the UK. However, due to the transformation of higher education from elite (up to 1963) to binary (up to 1992) to mass tertiary education, higher education institutions were structurally underfinanced. This situation deteriorated especially since 1992, when the former polytechnics and colleges of higher education became nominally equal to universities. Since 1998, students have to pay university fees (in SC, only non-Scottish students have to pay fees). Students fund their studies with the help of their parents, student loans, bursaries and part-time work.

Access to universities is regulated by the Universities & Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), with special procedures for applications to Oxford and Cambridge. Although two A-Levels are usually the minimum requirement for entering higher education, the requirements are higher for popular or prestigious universities and courses. Certain NVQs at level 3 (e.g. BTEC and OCR) would be accepted as A-Level equivalent by some, but certainly not all institutions. UCAS transforms qualifications into “points”, which are then used in the very complex admission process.

The first degree in the UK is the Bachelor’s degree (BA, BSc etc.), which takes three years of undergraduate study in EN, WS and NI and four years in SC. Postgraduate degrees are Master’s degrees (MA, MSc, MPhil etc.) which take one or two years of study. As non-degree post-graduate qualifications, there is the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), with the Scottish equivalent of the Professional Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE), which can be achieved one year after a BA and trains students for the teaching profession. First and postgraduate degrees as well as the PGCE and PGDE are coded as ISCED Level 5A. After a Master’s degree, students can pursue a Doctorate (PhD), which nominally takes three more years and is assigned to ISCED Level 6.

Some universities, particularly post-1992 universities, also award vocational certificates and diplomas, taking one or two years of study. These are however not academic degrees, and thus covered in the previous section (NVQ Level 4 and 5, i.e. HNC, HND etc.).

3.5 Overview over the application of the ISCED-97 in the UK

The following table gives an overview over the coding of ISCED-97 for the UK’s educational qualifications as specified by the OECD (1999: 112).

Table 2. Coding of the UK's educational qualifications (OECD)

| ISCED Level | Programme orientation | | |
|-------------|--|---|---|
| | A | B | C |
| 0 | Nursery schools, Playgroups, Reception classes; left school before age 11 (no qualification) | | |
| 1 | Primary school, Adult literacy and numeracy courses; left school age 11–14 (no qualification) | | |
| 2 | Left school after age 14 without qualification | | |
| 3 | GCE A/AS Level, Higher Grade, CSYS (all general), GNVQ/GSVQ Advanced, NVQ Level 3 (vocational) | | GCSEs, Standard Grade, GNVQ/GSVQ Foundation & Intermediate, NVQ Levels 1 (partly pre-vocational) & 2 (vocational) |
| 4 | HE Access Courses | | |
| 5 | medium: BA long: MA, PGCE, PGDE | NVQ Levels 4 & 5, HNC, HND, CertHE, DipHE | |
| 6 | Doctorate/PhD | | |

4 Problems with the implementation of the ISCED-97 for the UK

The most important, somewhat unresolved issue relates to the question when lower secondary education ends in the UK. The boundary between ISCED levels 2 and 3 is still under dispute for the UK (see e.g. OECD, 1999: 35; Office for National Statistics, 2006: 93), because it is argued that there is one transition at age 14 (after key stage 3) and another at age 16 (after key stage 4). GCSEs and SCE standard grades are currently categorised as ISCED Level 3C (general), and age 14 is the boundary for enrolment in the lower or upper secondary level (OECD, 1999: 112). However, age 14 is, in my view, not as important a transition point in the UK as age 16. Firstly, at age 14, there are only changes in the curriculum, namely increasing specialisation for the upcoming GCSEs. At age 16 in contrast, compulsory education ends, and both age 16 and the end of compulsory education are considered important criteria for the end of education at level 2 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2006 [1997]: 24). Secondly, at age 16, pupils acquire their first general school-leaving certificate, which is an entrance requirement for continuation in upper secondary general education. Thirdly, using age 16/GCSEs as the criterion to distinguish between lower and upper secondary education in the UK would also make sense with respect to international comparability, because it would be desirable to use the same coding for GCSEs as e.g. for the German "Realschulabschluss", the

Spanish “graduado en educación secundaria”, the Irish “Junior Certificate” and the French “Brevet” – namely 2A. Fourthly, it would be quite strange that in the UK, ISCED 2A would not contain any actual qualification, but only drop-outs (ISCED 2A would thus not give access to ISCED 3A, which is actually in disagreement with the concepts of the UNESCO and the OECD), and in order to go to university, pupils would have to go through ISCED 3C, as there would not be any direct path leading from ISCED 2A to 3A. It is also very unusual that there are general educational programmes classified as ISCED 3C. Lastly, and very importantly, with GCSEs and its equivalents coded as Level 3C (general), when the distinction between A, B, and C within level 3 is dropped, which happens in many international surveys, GCSEs and its equivalents are attributed to the same nominal level as A-Levels, which are ISCED 3A (general). Then, an important differentiation within the UK’s structure of educational credentials would be lost, and level 3 would become a very heterogeneous category, comprising everything between the lowest formal qualification and university entrance qualifications. For all these reasons, and very clearly so, I would classify GCSEs as ISCED 2.³

With respect to people who have not achieved GCSEs, I would then propose the following coding: Those who finished compulsory education or left school after age 14 (the end of compulsory schooling for older cohorts), but without achieving GCSEs or its equivalents, should be classified as ISCED 2C: They basically only have access to the labour market (although access to vocational courses at the post-compulsory level might be granted by the respective institutions on an individual basis, e.g. depending on work experience). Individuals who left full-time education after the age of 11, but before age 14, should be assigned to ISCED Level 1.

Concerning NVQ Level 3, although they are formally equivalent with A-Levels, as these qualifications rather prepare for ISCED level 5B and the labour market than ISCED 5A, it could be argued that these qualifications should be coded as ISCED 3B (see UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2006 [1997]: 39f.). Especially more prestigious universities do not accept applicants without (general) A-Levels. Also, there are otherwise no qualifications at the upper secondary level in the UK that are classified as 3B or 3C (which makes the UK’s educational system look unduly ‘undifferentiated’). However, many other countries classify similar qualifications as ISCED 3A (vocational), so for reasons of comparability, they will be left in this category here, too. This reminds us however of the importance of using the subcategories ‘vocational’ and ‘general’ at this level in order to reflect the strong internal heterogeneity of category 3A, which occurs in many countries. The same actually applies to ISCED level 2, where NVQs and GCSEs should also be differentiated, using the sub-

³ This is actually what also the British team of the European Social Survey (ESS) did when recoding the British set of qualifications into the ISCED-like variable in the ESS. The British quarterly labour force survey mentions that “the boundary between ISCED-97 levels 2 and 3 has still to be fixed for the UK” (Office for National Statistics, 2006: 93).

categories '(pre-) vocational' and 'general' within 2A. Table 3 shows the revised assignments, with the changes highlighted in grey.

Table 3. Coding of the UK's educational qualifications (revised)

| ISCED Level | Programme orientation | | |
|-------------|--|--|--|
| | A | B | C |
| 0 | Nursery schools, Playgroups, Reception classes; left school before age 11 | | |
| 1 | Primary school, Adult literacy and numeracy courses; left school at age 11–14 (no qualification) | | |
| 2 | GCSE, SCE Standard Grade (general), NVQ Level 1 (pre-vocational), NVQ Level 2 (vocational) | | Left school after age 14 without qualification |
| 3 | GCE A/AS Level, Higher Grade, CSYS (general), GNVQ/GSVQ Advanced, NVQ Level 3 (vocational) | | |
| 4 | HE Access Courses | | |
| 5 | medium: BA long: MA, PGCE, PGDE | NVQ 4 & 5, HNC, HND, CertHE, DipHE | |
| 6 | Doctorate | | |

5 Comparing the distribution of educational attainment in the UK Labour Force Survey with the EU-LFS

The EU-LFS data for the UK are from 2005, as no micro data are available for 2004 and the years before. For the comparison, the UK's Labour Force Survey, from which the EU-LFS data are derived, is used. It contains detailed information on the respondent's highest level of education, including vocational qualifications. The eight quarters from March 2004 to February 2006 (Office of National Statistics, 2004–2006) are used for the following analyses. The five most common qualifications among the working age population (age 25–64) are no qualification (19.2% of valid responses), O-Level/GCSE at grade C or above and equivalent (17.8%), a first degree (13%), trade apprenticeships (7.4%) and higher degrees (excluding the doc-

torate, 5.4%).⁴ Many of the more recently introduced qualifications are very rare (e.g. GNVQs, which are also being phased out again in 2007). Table 4 shows the distribution of the British educational qualifications in the EU-LFS and the UK's LFS. The results for the latter are shown firstly in a relatively detailed way, secondly according to the OECD's/Eurostat's mapping of UK qualifications to the ISCED-97, and lastly according to the revised mapping proposed here. The most detailed distribution is actually already aggregated from the LFS data, mainly summarising the many single NVQ-qualifications at each level and the English and Scottish versions of GCSEs and A-Levels.

To recapitulate, the revised application of ISCED-97 to the UK's educational qualifications differs from the OECD's proposed coding in two ways. Firstly, GCSEs and equivalent (general) qualifications are ISCED 2A in the revision, instead of ISCED 3C (general). Secondly, NVQ Level 1 and NVQ Level 2 qualifications are coded as ISCED 2A (vocational), according to the formal equivalencies with different levels of GCSEs, instead of ISCED 3C (vocational). This revision is more in line with the ISCED-97 concept and definitions than the proposed coding in the OECD/Eurostat mappings. However this revision obviously makes a distinction within ISCED level 2 (particularly between 2C and 2A) highly desirable, which is currently not implemented in the EU-LFS. Maybe this latter fact and the need for a distinction between people with GCSEs (and equivalent qualifications) and people without qualifications who finished lower secondary education is the main reason why the current official ISCED mapping deviates from the ISCED guidelines, thereby compromising international comparability.

Comparing the EU-LFS with the UK's LFS distribution, most categories are indeed very similar. Recoding the UK data, it was possible to identify ISCED level 1, which is missing in the EU-LFS distribution for the UK. There is however a problem with ISCED level 2 and 3C qualifications: Even with the help of the Eurostat and OECD mappings for the UK, it is very difficult to see which national qualifications were coded in which EU-LFS category. ISCED 2 is 4.3% smaller in the EU-LFS, because the 'no qualification' group altogether is considerably bigger in the national data, which is strange and hard to explain. Then, the EU-LFS reports three categories at ISCED level 3 which are *not* ISCED 3A/B. It is totally unclear which qualifications could be included in the category 'ISCED 3 (without distinction a, b or c possible, 3 y+)' – it is used in neither in the OECD nor in the Eurostat mapping table. The percentages for 'ISCED 3C (short)' and '(long)' in the EU-LFS also do not match the distribution derived from the UK LFS at all.⁵

⁴ There are however also substantial amounts of missing data: 7.6% of all respondents chose the category "other qualification". The reported percentages refer to valid data only.

⁵ In the European Social Survey, rounds 1 and 3 respectively, there are 21.6 and 21.1% without qualifications, 26.5 and 21.9% with ISCED 3C (short and long undifferentiated),

Table 4. Educational distributions in the UK using OECD and revised coding, detailed and crude ISCED-97 classification (QLFS UK, 2004–2005)

| British educational attainment categories | ISCED-97 | | EU-LFS 2005 | UK LFS 2004/2005 | | |
|---|------------------------------------|--------------|---------------------------------------|------------------|------|---------|
| | (OECD) | (revised) | | detail | OECD | revised |
| No qualification, left school before age 11 | ISCED 0 | | 0.2 | 0.1 | 0.1 | 0.1 |
| No qualification, left school between age 11 and 14 | ISCED 1 | | — | 0.3 | 0.3 | 0.3 |
| No qualification, left school after age 14 | ISCED 2A | ISCED 2C | 14.9 | 19.2 | 19.2 | |
| NVQ level 1 or equiv. | ISCED 3C prev | ISCED 2A voc | | 2.0 | | |
| CSE below grade 1, GCSE below grade C | ISCED 3C gen (short) | ISCED 2A gen | 13.9 ^a 8.3 ^b | 3.1 | | 53.7 |
| NVQ level 2 or equiv. | ISCED 3C voc | ISCED 2A voc | 18.6 ^c sum: 40.8 | 11.6 | 34.5 | |
| O level, GCSE grade A–C or equivalent | ISCED 3C gen (long) | ISCED 2A gen | | 17.8 | | |
| AS/A-Level or equiv. | ISCED 3A gen | | 14.8 | 6.9 | 14.9 | 14.9 |
| NVQ level 3 or equiv. | ISCED 3A voc (or 3B voc) | | | 8.0 | | |
| Access courses | ISCED 4A gen | | 0.1 | 0.1 | 0.1 | 0.1 |
| NVQ level 4 or equiv. | ISCED 5B | | 8.9 | 10 | | |
| NVQ level 5 or equiv. | ISCED 5B | | | 0.2 | | |
| First/foundation degree, other degree | ISCED 5A (1 st /medium) | | 19.4 | 14.4 | 30.0 | 30.0 |
| Higher degree | ISCED 5A (2 nd /long) | | | 5.4 | | |
| PhD | ISCED 6 | | 0.9 | 0.9 | 0.9 | 0.9 |

Notes: Respondents aged 25–64.

^a ISCED 3C (shorter than 3 years)

^b ISCED 3 (without distinction a, b or c possible, 3 y+)

^c ISCED 3C (3 years and more)

12.8 and 11.3% with ISCED 3A, 38 and 43.7% with ISCED 5 and 1 and 1.6% with PhDs (ISCED 4A, ISCED 5A and 5B cannot be differentiated in the UK's national education variable in the ESS, and the data for round 2 did not include vocational qualifications and are thus not comparable). For the problematic ISCED 2 and 3C, the ESS is closer to the UK LFS than to the EU-LFS results reported in table 4. Overall the ESS however considerably overestimates ISCED level 5 and 6.

Looking at the most detailed distribution, there are hardly any people with less than lower secondary education – secondary education can be regarded as virtually universal in the UK, although according to the UK's LFS, still a fifth of the population does not hold any formal secondary schooling certificate. Most people who achieve A-levels continue to higher education, so that there are not very many people left with A-levels as their highest qualification (6.9%). ISCED 4A is, as expected, tiny. At ISCED level 5, one third of the qualifications are vocational (5B) and two thirds academic degrees (5A).

Looking at the most crude seven-level ISCED-97 classification, it turns out that according to the OECD's and the revised coding, only three categories – level 2, 3 and 5, are common in the UK: Hardly anybody has less than compulsory education, ISCED 4 is very rare, and ISCED 6 is – for obvious reasons – also quite small. More generally speaking, if the sub-categories A, B, C and general/vocational are ignored, the distribution boils down to a simple three-category scheme: lower secondary education and less, upper secondary education and more (but not tertiary) and tertiary education. This certainly entails a distortion of the UK's complex structure of qualifications. The crude OECD classification hides the difference between GCSEs and equivalent and A-Levels and equivalent qualifications. The revised coding in turn hides the difference between people leaving school after age 14 without qualifications, which is relatively common in the UK, and those with GCSEs. The most eye-catching consequence of the proposed revision is a downgrading of the educational distribution: Using the OECD mappings, just below 50% of the population have ISCED level 3 qualifications, and 19.2% are classified as ISCED 2 (namely those without any formal qualification). According to the revised mapping, it is the other way round: 53.6% are classified as ISCED level 2, and only 14.9% hold upper secondary qualifications, approximately half of which are vocational. This huge difference is the result of classifying GCSEs and equivalent qualifications as lower secondary instead of upper secondary. Whereas the official solution uses the ISCED categories available in the EU-LFS in a way that reflects an important distinction in the national data, cross-national comparability is certainly higher with the revised coding. A more detailed implementation of the ISCED-97 in the EU-LFS, allowing for some differentiation within ISCED level 2, would serve both purposes best.

6 Conclusions

Is the ISCED-97 well suited to reflect the UK's educational qualifications? The full scheme (including the distinction between general and vocational qualifications) maybe is, but clearly not the seven *levels* of education alone. On the one hand, the crude ISCED-97 classification leads to very heterogeneous categories, especially at level 2 or 3 (depending on the version used: revised or OECD) and level 5, which hide important (also vertical) differences between educational qualifications. Thus,

in order to achieve an adequate picture of the UK's distribution of educational attainment, sub-categories within ISCED levels (A, B and C) must be reported, and also some sub-sub-categories, namely vocational or general within 2A and 3A, and 1st/2nd degree at ISCED level 5A. On the other hand, levels 0, 1, 4 and 6 are not very common in the UK, and the absorption of level 4 into level 3 and of level 6 into level 5A (2nd) would not lead to much loss of information. Finally, it depends on the researcher's interest if a detailed classification is desirable, or if the simple distinction between lower secondary education and less, upper secondary education (including vocational) and tertiary education (including vocational) is sufficient. For comparative purposes, however, such a simplification might lead to distortions that prevent comparability.

Have the ISCED-97 categories been applied to the UK's qualifications in such a way that the categories are comparable to other countries? Only to some extent: Firstly, the OECD's coding is especially problematic in that it assigns GCSEs and equivalent qualifications to ISCED level 3 (even if C). In other countries, the first educational qualification, gained at the end of compulsory education, is always coded as ISCED 2. Secondly, vocational A-Levels, GNVQ advanced etc. might rather be coded as 3B than 3A, as they prepare for professional rather than academic higher education. These qualifications would then be on par with e.g. the French Bac pro. However, this cannot be evaluated properly when focussing on only one educational system, as it is done in this chapter (therefore I decided to leave it in 3A). It would thus be very desirable to synthesise the application of ISCED to educational qualifications in a number of countries, so that qualifications from different countries at similar levels are compared with each other, rather than national qualifications at different levels. Within categories, qualifications should be "more equivalent" than between categories, and functional "milestones" like university entrance qualifications should have the same coding in all countries.

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