

Great Britain

The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is located in western Europe between the North Atlantic Ocean and the North Sea. It is separated from France, its nearest neighbor on mainland Europe, by the English Channel. (It is also sometimes referred to as Great Britain or simply Britain). The United Kingdom (or UK) includes England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, with London as the capital. The UK is somewhat smaller than the state of Oregon in size and is populated by slightly more than 62.6 million people (2011 estimate), 92.15 percent of whom are white (English, Scottish, Welsh, or northern Irish), and other portions of the population are 2 percent black, 1.8 percent Indian, 1.3 percent Pakistani, 1.2 percent mixed, and 1.6 percent other. The religious composition of the UK includes the following: 71.6 percent are Christian (mostly Anglican, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, or Methodist), 2.7 percent are Muslim, 1 percent Hindu, 1.6 percent other and 23.1 percent unspecified or none.

The UK is a constitutional monarchy in which the monarch serves a largely ceremonial function as the chief of state, while the prime minister serves as the head of government. The legislative branch consists of Parliament, which includes the House of Lords and House of Commons, while the judicial branch is composed of the House of Courts (the highest court of appeal), the supreme courts of England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, and Scotland's Court of Session and Court of the Justiciary.

The UK is a leading trading power and financial center of the world, and its economy is one of the strongest in Europe. It has an intensive and highly mechanized agricultural sector; large coal, natural gas and oil reserves; and a service industry that accounts for the largest share of the gross domestic product (GDP).¹

Education and religion

In the United Kingdom, students are required to attend school at least until they are 16 years of age. More than 90 percent attend public schools, which are obliged to adhere to a national curriculum that was introduced in 1992. This curriculum divides schooling into four key stages (up to age 7, 7–11, 11–14, and 14–16), and it prescribes the subjects to be taught. After five years of secondary education, students take exams to obtain the general certificate of secondary education (GCSE), after which they have several different choices: They may leave school, continue their education at vocational/technical colleges, or proceed with their education and ultimately take advanced level (A-level) examinations needed to qualify them for university entrance.²

Religious education is compulsory under the national curriculum; however, the Education Act of 1996 grants parents the right to withdraw their children from religious education and acts of worship in the public schools. It also does not specify what specific religion is to be taught. Local education authorities establish a Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) to advise the central authorities on what religious content should be taught in local schools, in this way reflecting the plurality of religions within the UK at large and in specific local communities. Despite efforts to be inclusive and tolerant toward diverse religious orientations, however, the 1988 Education Reform Act requires that syllabi reflect that Great Britain is mainly Christian, a phenomenon that may be explained by the close relationship between the state and the Anglican Church.

While the UK has become more religiously diverse, Christianity continues to be the dominant faith, although individual schools may teach tolerance of different religions as well as factual knowledge about them; indeed, factual knowledge about religions is a required part of the nationwide GCSE examinations. In other words, students are not necessarily indoctrinated into one particular faith, but rather they are educated about various religious traditions, ideas, and opinions. They are also expected to become knowledgeable about their own religious preferences as well as those of others. While the existing practice is not the same as a scientific approach to comparative religious studies, it has been defined as a pragmatic approach to the existing religious diversity in the actual world of schooling. Since this kind of religious education provides opportunities to learn about diverse religions and to reduce stereotypes about them, it has been characterized as a form of multiculturalism.

Concerns abound, however. Parents worry that teachers are not adequately prepared to teach about diverse religions. In addition, religions are only recognized and taught in a particular school if a religious community is sizable enough, which may leave out some important religions simply because of local conditions. Furthermore, many non-Christian parents continue to be disturbed by the dominance of the Christian religion in public schools. One result is that the Muslim community, for example, has been successful in opening independent Islamic schools in Great Britain, some of them receiving state funding that is available for denominational schools.³

Notes

- 1 Central Intelligence Agency, "Great Britain," *The World Factbook*, at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/uk.html> (accessed on April 25, 2011).
- 2 "School Curriculum," at <http://www.britishcouncil.org/usa-education-uk-system-k-12-curriculum-england.htm> (accessed on March 26, 2007).
- 3 Sabine Mannitz, "The Place of Religion in Four Civil Cultures," in *Civil Enculturation: Nation-State, School, and Ethnic Difference in The Netherlands, Britain, Germany and France*. Werner Schiffauer and others, eds (New York: Beghahn Books, 2004), 102–110.