

RTEI Country Brief 2021 – United Kingdom (England & Wales)

Introduction

The Right to Education Index (RTEI) is a global index designed to drive accountability towards realising the right to education. This short report reviews the key findings discovered by the UK RTEI data collection process, identifies areas in which decision makers should look to improve efforts to realise the right to education, and sets forth several policy recommendations. The RTEI Questionnaire was completed by 15 participating RTEI countries in 2021 and comprised of 5 themes: governance, availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability. The UK's completed questionnaire can be found, [here](#).

RTEI 2021 – How did the UK perform?

UK (ENGLAND & WALES) RTEI SCORE		85%
Governance		79%
International Framework		72%
National Law		93%
Plan of Action		67%
Monitoring and Reporting		100%
Financing		68%
Data Availability		74%
Availability		59%
Classroom		46%
Sanitation		50%
Teachers		96%
Learning Materials		46%
Accessibility		77%
Free Education		63%
Participation		91%
Acceptability		86%
Aims of Education		67%
Learning Environment		92%
Learning Outcomes		99%

Adaptability		64%
Children with Disabilities		100%
Children of Minorities & Indigenous Peoples		0%
Girls		87%
Child Labour		50%
Migrants, Refugees, IDPS, and Children Deprived of Liberty		80%
Armed Conflict		67%
By indicator type		
Structural		73%
Process		77%
Outcome		93%

General

Overall, the United Kingdom scored very strongly on the Right to Education Index with an index score of 85, making it the highest performing country in the 2021 RTEI. However, this is a drop in index score from 2016 (86) and 2018 (88). One may conclude that this could well be due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, but some of the data used are from the pre-Covid era.

The UK consistently ranks above the average score for the various themes studied, but falls short on adaptability and availability – a pattern that can also be observed in 2016 and 2018.

The data and RTEI score this year reflect England & Wales only, as the different constituent countries of the UK have devolved education systems so their scores may be different to the UK (England and Wales) result.

Adaptability

The UK performs near the country average on adaptability in 2021.

'Adaptability' is one of the UK's worst performing areas where adequate data exists, just as it was in 2016 and 2018. A further breakdown of the data suggests that some improvements have been made, nevertheless, the subcategory of 'Children of Minorities & Indigenous Peoples' has gained an alarmingly low score of 0. This reflects the absent support for mother tongue instruction as well as adapting education to the needs of indigenous peoples and nomadic communities.

Children who learn English as a second language (EAL) make up more than 15% of school children. EAL learners face a triple challenge in their learning. They have to acquire both colloquial and academic English; they must develop the knowledge, skills and understanding of that curriculum; they must also overcome the culturally-bound aspect of schooling. EAL learners, particularly new arrivals, may struggle in these three areas for a while as they learn to catch up with their peers.

New research published by the Education Policy Institute shows that 'at the end of primary school, late-arriving EAL pupils are 15.5 months behind native English speakers and at

secondary, they are 20.7 months behind', suggesting a lack of resources and training for teachers.¹

Availability

The UK receives a very poor score of 59% in the availability category, in terms of classroom sub-theme the UK ranks 3rd lowest, in comparison to all countries surveyed. This display is repeated for sanitation and learning materials. This is a stark reminder that 'spending per child' has consistently fallen since 2010.

There is legislation limiting class sizes to 30 for children between 5-7 years old. For all other age groups and subjects there is only guidance, which is not always adhered to. Although there is indication that most students are taught in class sizes of under 30, which is widely regarded as an appropriate limit, reports of oversized classes are becoming more frequent and severe.

The lack of availability of sanitation requirements and learning materials is a cause for concern and highlights the level of inequality in the UK's education system that the pandemic has underlined.

Accessibility

The UK also ranks fairly low for access to free education. Until 1998, full-time students in England could attend public universities completely free of charge. But concerns about declining quality at public institutions, government mandated caps on enrolment, and sharply rising inequality in college attainment led to a package of reforms which began in 1998, including the introduction of a modest tuition fee. Two decades later, most public universities in England now charge £9,250 per year. The typical English bachelor's degree recipient is now expected to graduate with around £44,000 worth of debt. The RTEI suggests that such figures have created a widening socio-economic disparity between those who can and can't afford tertiary education, although student finance loans are available to all, for many it is a heavy debt burden to face.

Data Availability

The RTEI Index Score this year reflects England and Wales only. This highlights that there is a real lack of data and alignment across the devolved governments. Accordingly, this indicates that disparities between the four nations are not taken into account in this study and as such the score for the UK is representative of England and Wales. Moreover, the differences in education policy between England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland could have changed the UK's overall score.

COVID-19

The pandemic highlighted the stark effects of underfunding the education system and investing in children's futures. Concerns about the impact of the pandemic on children's learning, health and mental wellbeing were raised early on in the lockdown, with the government opening inquiries to monitor the impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services in late March and on white disadvantaged pupils in April 2020.²

¹ <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/education-in-england-annual-report-2020/>

² <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/202/the-impact-of-covid19-on-education-and-childrens-services/> / <https://committees.parliament.uk/call-for-evidence/123/>

Educational organisations were quick to predict that school closures were likely to widen existing gaps in performance between pupils from lower income homes and their peers (see e.g. the Children's Commissioner, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), the Education Policy Institute (EPI), the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) and the Sutton Trust). For example, in June 2020, the EEF produced a rapid evidence review predicting that school closures were likely to reverse progress made to close the gap in attainment between pupils from lower and higher income backgrounds over the last decade, estimating it could widen by 36% to 12.5 months (an increase of 3.3 months; EEF, 2020).

Recommendations:

- The UK Government, including all devolved governments, should improve their data collection and publication to ensure cross-UK data accuracy in such studies.
 - The UK Government should play an active role in structuring and assuring English non-academic qualifications, something which is prevalent in other OECD countries and in secondary and upper secondary academic qualifications.
 - The UK should ensure that all its education programmes embody the positive aspects of its domestic education policies as highlighted by RTEI. It is imperative that the gains in the UK are shared to facilitate a stronger, global education system.
 - To address the shortcomings in education for EAL children, the Government should adequately resource local authorities and set clearer criteria for local authorities to fulfil in relation to EAL students. There may also be a role for Ofsted, the education regulator, to more closely monitor and enforce EAL outcomes.
 - Data tracking – As society in general and education more specifically recovers from the pandemic, there is a real need for data tracking and monitoring. Schools will need systems in place for intervention planning, including for induction, the early stages of learning English, and supporting more advanced learners. The tracking data needs to be captured and scrutinised carefully.
 - Staffing - To ensure that all groups of pupils at school make progress it is clear that staffing has to be adequate.
 - Teaching - Building the capacity of mainstream teachers to deploy language-aware EAL pedagogy will have a greater impact on EAL learner outcomes than withdrawing these pupils from the classroom. ‘
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