Quality education

Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

Prepared by

Supported by
There has been good progress in achieving this goal although it has been uneven across the country. This is partly due to the lack of policy coherence between early years learning and the national curriculum in England, and the number of under-achieving pupils (disproportionately male) in parts of the UK school system. It is also reflected in the relatively low policy priority and status given to further education and vocational training by successive governments and employers, along with a failure to prioritise training for careers linked to the green economy.

The proportion of young people without credible work remains stubbornly high at 12%, in some cases reflecting poor educational outcomes. Nevertheless, there has been a progressive increase in the percentage of pupils achieving early learning goals, the UK does comparatively well in international tests and UK universities perform well in world rankings. Educational policy priorities in Wales and Scotland have supported the implementation of education for sustainable development. Educational facilities are generally very good in the UK, availability of higher education scholarships for trainees from developing countries is high, and most UK teachers are well qualified. The challenge of implementing SDG4 lies in UK willingness to contribute to a cross-sector UK-wide, social learning process.

Performance rating

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sustainable Development Goal Target</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes</td>
<td>🟠</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education</td>
<td>🟠</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university</td>
<td>🟠</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship</td>
<td>🟠</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5 By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations</td>
<td>🟠</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6 By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy</td>
<td>🟠</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7 By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development.</td>
<td>🟢</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.a Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all</td>
<td>🟢</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.b By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and African countries, for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programmes, in developed countries and other developing countries</td>
<td>🟢</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.c By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing states</td>
<td>🟢</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Key findings

1. The majority of school-age children in the UK are offered an appropriate quality education

2. The UK is a relatively good place to go to school if you are female or from a minority community

3. Progress on technical and vocational training has been limited due mainly to the lack of political priority given to it by successive governments and the absence of significant investment by the employment sector

4. UK universities are among the best in the world and consistently perform well in world rankings

5. Education for sustainable development has benefited from the policy priority given to it in Wales and Scotland but lacks a mandate in England

6. DFID is recognised as a world leader in the promotion and support of education in low-income countries

Performance and progress

The vast majority of school-age children in the UK are offered an appropriate quality education (Target 4.1). In 2016/17, 90% of primary and 79% of secondary schools in England were judged to be good or outstanding by OFSTED, the official school inspector. However, the existence across the UK of a small but persistent number of underperforming schools remains a concern. In England there are hundreds of schools that have never achieved adequate OFSTED inspection reports.

The UK was ranked 15th out of 70 nations overall in the 2015 PISA tests of science, maths and reading with relatively high levels of low achievers (disproportionately boys) across all three areas. In the 2016 PIRLS assessment of reading comprehension, Northern Ireland was 6th and England 8th out of 41 countries. Raising the quality of early years provision (Target 4.2) is a priority across the UK and there are consistently good participation rates (~95% from 2012 – 2017) across the UK as a result of policy emphases. Scotland’s attainment challenge has a focus on early years literacy, numeracy, health and wellbeing in specific areas of deprivation. In Wales, 84% of boys and 91% of girls achieved outcome five or above in the Welsh Foundations Phase Indicator for early years covering personal, social, cultural, language, communication, and maths attainment. In England 94% of early years education providers are judged to be good or outstanding but there is a lack of policy coherence between early years’ goals and the national curriculum, and a need for more emphasis on numeracy, reading, and writing in reception classes, with more priority given to listening to imaginative and stimulating stories.

The percentage of 16 to 24-year olds in education, employment, or training across the UK was 88% in 2016, much as it was in 2004 before falling to a low of 84% in 2011 (Target 4.3). Applications for further study from those in educationally disadvantaged areas remain low (24% in Northern Ireland, 23% in England, 20% in Wales, 17% in Scotland).
Women are more likely to apply to higher education (HE) than men (England 36%, Northern Ireland 40%, Wales 48%, Scotland 56%). The social group that is least likely to participate in HE (and who also do relatively poorly at school) remains white boys from low-income households.\textsuperscript{12}

The Further Education (FE) or skills sector provides education, training and apprenticeships for large number of learners over 16 (around 3.3 million in England) (Target 4.4), but progress on technical and vocational training has been limited by successive governments across the UK giving this insufficient political priority and by the absence of significant employer investment. An underlying skills deficit remains, especially for the green economy. Technical and vocational training has long suffered from low status despite many attempts to reform its qualifications and make it more attractive to parents and students. However, data on educational attainment matched to employment needs was 69\% in late 2015 (a roughly consistent figure since 2002).\textsuperscript{13} By contrast, 15\% were under-educated, and 16\% over-educated. Those born abroad are more likely to be over-qualified for the jobs they do. Gender differences are small. More than 460,000 people began an apprenticeship in 2016/17 but initial inspection reports showed that over 50\% of provision required improvement. Meanwhile, UK Universities consistently perform well in world rankings (four in the top ten of the QS rankings in 2018).\textsuperscript{14}

Although there remain many unresolved disparity issues of gender, disability and ethnicity in terms of participation, access and outcomes (Target 4.5), the UK is a relatively good place to go to school if you are female or from a minority community. A 2016 report on educational inequalities in England and Wales showed clear regional variation at GCSE and the performance gap between the richest and the poorest has remained persistently large since the mid-1980s.\textsuperscript{15} Females outnumber males in most of the HE provision in the UK with the largest gender disparity being in the non-science disciplines. Part-time numbers of HE students are currently falling because, some say, of raised tuition fees for mature students.

A 2013 OECD survey of adult skills found that England was the only country in the developed world where those aged 55 to 65 performed better than 16 to 24 year olds in functional levels of literacy and numeracy (Target 4.6) with adults in full-time employment most likely to have the highest levels.\textsuperscript{16} The current approach to lifelong learning in the UK is failing to address a number of key issues, namely, that young adults in the UK have lower levels of numeracy and literacy than in other advanced countries and people are less likely to participate in learning as they age. These and a range of contextual issues tend to constrain or even distort the undoubted benefits of lifelong learning, especially in improving wellbeing and its positive contribution to socially positive attitudes and behaviours.

Significant policy priority has being given in Scotland and Wales to providing the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development (Target 4.7).\textsuperscript{17} In Scotland, all learners are legally entitled to learning for sustainability and every practitioner, school and education leader has to demonstrate learning for sustainability in their practice within a whole school approach.\textsuperscript{18} In Wales the aim is to prepare students in schools to be 21st century global citizens, with seven themes that link closely to multiple SDGs at each key stage of education: wealth and poverty; identity and culture; choices and decisions; climate change; consumption and waste; natural environment and health. Across the UK the picture is variable with a range of good practice in some schools, for example through the Global Learning (DfID) and Connecting Classrooms (British Council / DfID) programmes, and in parts of FE and HE. In the absence of
any UK-wide evaluation it is difficult to establish the scale and range of progress and impossible to assess the impact on behaviour, attitudes and competences in civil society and workplaces.

Good progress has been made in all three Means of Implementation Targets (Targets 4a, 4b and 4c) but ensuring a continuing supply of well-motivated, appropriately remunerated and well and appropriately qualified teachers remains a fundamental condition for guaranteeing a quality education at all levels. There is evidence that teachers are open to change but they need space and time to take more initiative in a supportive policy environment.

**Synergies and coherence**

SDG4 has a crucial role in promoting the achievement of the full spectrum of SDGs, enabling UK learners of all ages to take informed decisions and responsible actions and create sustainable societies now and for the future. The UK-wide Global Learning Programme has a focus on SDGs 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6, and the Connecting Classrooms programme has a focus on the skills required throughout the SDGs. On energy (SDG7), a broad range of UK schools have adopted technologies to reduce consumption and increase efficiency. Equality and inclusion (SDG10) has long been a feature of UK schools – for example, through Curriculum for Excellence in Scotland. SDG4 promotes an education that emphasises a circular economy that eliminates the concept of waste (SDG12). Activities focusing on the human impact of climate change (SDG13) are linked to a number of curricular areas including science, English and geography in both the curriculum for younger years and in examination syllabuses. Securing a peaceful and just society (SDG16) for the well-being of current and future generations is embedded in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act and reflected in curricula across the UK.

**Local to international dimension**

International cooperation is crucial to the global implementation of SDG4 where 263 million children and young people remain out of school with a further 330 million estimated to be in school but not learning the basics. The UK Department for International Development (DFID) is recognised as a world leader on the promotion of education in developing countries and uses part of the UK’s 0.7% of GNI spent on overseas aid to fund overseas educational initiatives. This, coupled with the growing dissemination work of the UK National Commission for UNESCO and the British Council, is furthering the international reputation of the UK.

The professional development focus of the UK-wide Global Learning Programme helps teachers to help young people in school understand their role in a globally interdependent world by exploring strategies by which it might become more just and sustainable. It familiarises students with the concepts of interdependence, development, globalisation and sustainability through a strong focus on the SDGs, using these to stimulate critical thinking about global issues and examine alternative models of development and sustainability.
Recommended actions

1. Identify, disseminate, and support existing effective policy and practice in SDG-related teaching and learning across the UK

2. Support all educational institutions and providers (pre-school to post-graduate provision) to further develop effective curricula and schemes of work that integrate SDG-related issues into students’ experiences, including ecological imagination, critical thinking and a greater awareness of the interdependence of all life

3. Revise, using proven strategic planning processes for sustainable development, all technical and vocational provision to make it fit for the 21st century

4. Ensure that the SDGs feature prominently and coherently within all teacher education provision, with a focus on integration within subject, appropriate pedagogy, and assessment and evaluation. Establish a commission to oversee UK-wide strategies to support this programme of teacher education

5. Continue to give attention in all schools to the issue of underachievement of boys, through participatory learning strategies, clear, realistic and positive goal-setting for all those less motivated to learn, and imaginative interaction with extended families
Case study

Connecting Classrooms – Learning for Sustainability Scotland

SDG TARGETS: 4.4, 4.7

Scotland is unique internationally in requiring that all learners are entitled to Learning for Sustainability (LfS) and that all teachers and education professionals address it in their practice.

To help educators address these requirements, the British Council, the University of Edinburgh and Learning for Sustainability Scotland has developed a professional learning initiative for teachers; Learning for Sustainability: Connecting Classrooms.

More than 350 teachers have participated in the 10-week long programme funded by the Department for International Development since 2015.

Connecting Classrooms provides an opportunity for teachers to grapple with what Learning for Sustainability means, what teaching methods and practice is required to develop critical thinking, problem solving and citizenship skills, and how this can be embedded into their school to ensure it has a positive impact on their learners. This successful programme has been developed drawing on the British Council’s ‘Core Skills’ materials and was created to support Connecting Classrooms across the UK and approximately 35 other countries. Scotland’s teachers have the opportunity to engage with and develop these ‘Core Skills’ over a 10-week blended learning course. A further 10 months is allocated for self-directed continued professional development and online collaboration, leading to a teacher achieving ‘GTCS Professional Recognition’.

The success of the project has led to the development of a facilitated online version of the programme.

www.ed.ac.uk/education/professional-learning/connecting-classrooms-learning-and-sustainability
Case study

National Numeracy Challenge

SDG TARGETS: 4.6, 8.5

In May 2018 the UK celebrated National Numeracy Day for the first time; a day to raise awareness of the need for basic numeracy skills. Numeracy skills are essential life skills, allowing people to undertake simple calculations such as household budgeting and purchasing, or in the workplace. Research from University College London and the University of Cambridge in 2018 found that one in three adults in England and Northern Ireland cannot work out the correct change from a shopping trip, with one in four unable to calculate a product discount while on that shopping trip.19

The National Numeracy Challenge is an online and mobile phone learning application that is trying to rectify this by allowing people to quickly assess their numeracy skill level, understand their needs and set a learning target. It then helps them develop their numeracy skills and work towards that target. Since its inception, the National Numeracy Challenge has had over 150,000 learners, and developed more than 800 learner resources.

www.nnchallenge.org.uk/home/index.html
Endnotes

4. TIMSS & PIRLS. (2016). timssandpirls.bc.edu/pirls2016/international-results/pirls/student-achievement/