

# Education at a Glance 2023

## Country note

### United Kingdom

This country note provides an overview of the key characteristics of the education system in the United Kingdom. It draws on data from *Education at a Glance 2023*. In line with the thematic focus of this year's *Education at a Glance*, it emphasises vocational education and training (VET), while also covering other parts of the education system. Data in this note are provided for the latest available year. Readers interested in the reference years for the data are referred to the corresponding tables in *Education at a Glance 2023*.

#### Highlights

- Vocational education is less common in the United Kingdom than in other OECD countries. In 2022, 16% of 25-34 year-olds had a vocational qualification as highest level of educational attainment compared to 23% across the OECD. In the UK, 58% of 25-34 year-olds had a tertiary qualification as highest level of educational attainment compared to 47% across the OECD.
- The possibility to combine school and work-based learning is one of the greatest advantages of vocational education. In the UK, only 39% of students are enrolled in vocational upper secondary programmes that offer work-based learning components. This is lower than the OECD average of 45%. In some countries, such as Denmark, Germany and Switzerland all or nearly all vocational upper secondary students are enrolled in such programmes.
- The UK is a highly popular destination for international students at tertiary level. With 601 000 international students in 2021, it is the second only to the United States. The number of international students has been growing rapidly in recent years despite the COVID-19 pandemic. While there were 489 000 international students in 2019, their number increased to 551 000 in 2020, the first year of the pandemic, and 601 000 in 2021, the second year of the pandemic.
- Sufficient financial resources are a precondition for high quality education. Sufficient financial resources are a precondition for high quality education. The United Kingdom invests 4.2% of its GDP into education (from primary to post-secondary non-tertiary), which is above the OECD average of 3.6%. Public investment into education as a share of GDP is 3.7%, above the OECD average of 3.3%. Similarly, private investment, at 0.5% of GDP, is above the OECD average of 0.3%.
- The share of private expenditure on early childhood education and care is exceptionally high in the United Kingdom. With 40% of total expenditure on early childhood education and care coming from private sources, the share is the highest of all OECD countries and significantly higher than the OECD average of 15%. This data reflect the situation before the reforms to childcare announced in March 2023 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-education-entitlements-and-funding/early-education-entitlements-and-funding-update-march-2023>).
- As in most OECD countries, teacher salaries in England and Scotland are lower than salaries of other tertiary educated workers. In England, actual salaries of pre-primary and primary teachers are 15% lower than the average salary of tertiary educated workers. At lower and upper secondary

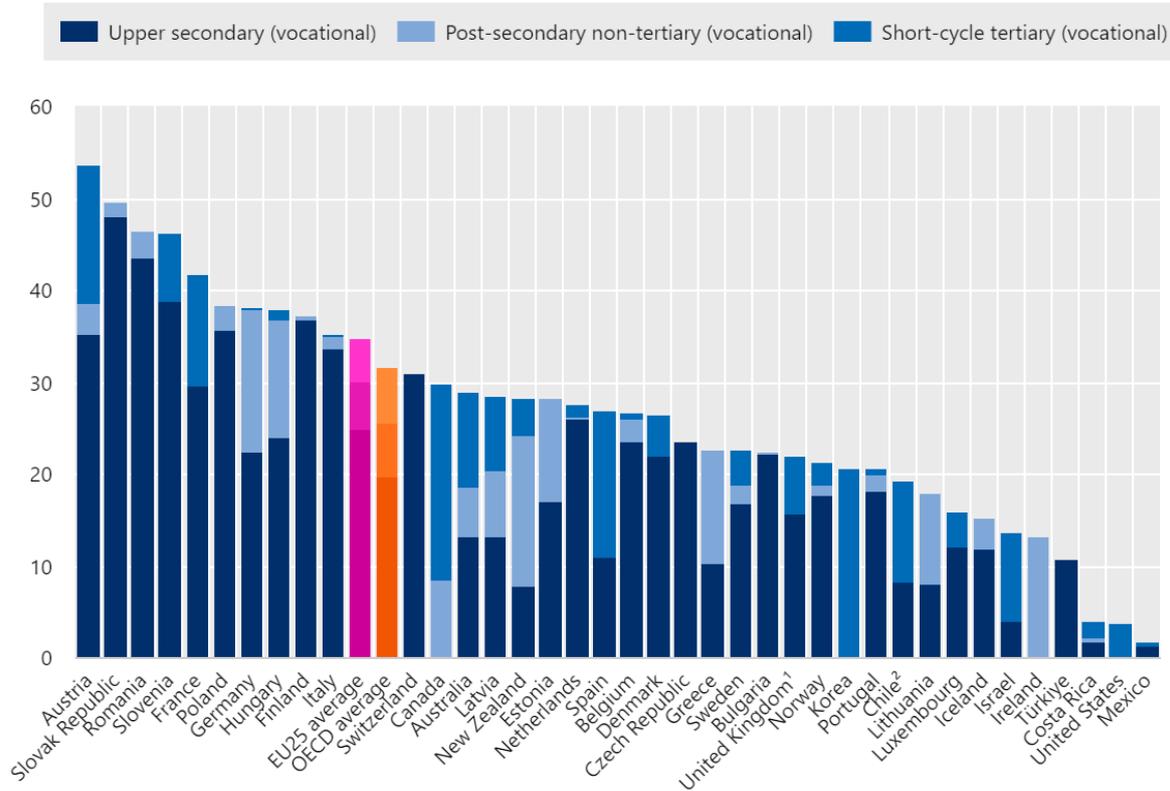
level, the gap is smaller with 6%. In Scotland, teachers at all levels of education earn on average 7% less than other tertiary educated workers. In contrast, school heads are well paid compared to other tertiary workers. At lower and upper secondary level, school heads in England earn 2.17 times the average salary of tertiary educated workers, which is the highest relative salary of all OECD countries.

## The output of educational institutions and the impact of learning

- High-quality VET programmes integrate learners into labour markets and open pathways for further personal and professional development. However, the quality and importance of VET programmes differ greatly across countries. In some countries, half of all young adults (25-34 year-olds) have a vocational qualification as their highest level of educational attainment, while the share is in the low single digits in other countries. In the United Kingdom, 22% of 25-34 year-olds have a VET qualification as their highest level of attainment: 16% at upper secondary level and 6% at short-cycle tertiary level (Figure 1).
- Across the OECD, unemployment rates for 25-34 year-olds with vocational upper secondary attainment are lower than for their peers with general upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary attainment. This is also the case in the United Kingdom, where 3.6% of young adults with vocational upper secondary attainment are unemployed, compared to 3.8% of those with general upper secondary attainment.
- Although an upper secondary qualification is often the minimum attainment needed for successful labour-market participation, some 25-34 year-olds still leave education without such a qualification. On average across the OECD, 14% of young adults have not attained an upper secondary qualification. In the United Kingdom, the share is lower than the OECD average (13%).
- Workers in the United Kingdom aged 25-34 with vocational upper secondary attainment earn 54% more than those without upper secondary attainment, whereas the earning advantage for workers with general upper secondary attainment is 80%. However, in almost all OECD countries, tertiary degrees provide a significantly larger earnings advantage. In the United Kingdom, 25-34 year-old workers with bachelor's attainment (or equivalent) earn 129% more than their peers without upper secondary attainment, while those with master's or doctoral attainment (or equivalent) earn 152% more.
- Tertiary attainment continues to increase among the working age population. On average across the OECD, tertiary attainment is becoming as common as upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary attainment among 25-64 year-olds. In the United Kingdom, 51% of 25-64 year-olds have tertiary attainment, a larger share than those that have upper secondary attainment (30%).
- On average across OECD countries, 14.7% of young adults aged 18-24 are not in education, employment or training (NEET), while in the United Kingdom the corresponding figure is 11.8%. Reducing NEET rates among young adults is a particularly important challenge in all countries because those who become NEET face worse labour-market outcomes later in life than their peers who remained in education or training at this age.

Figure 1. Share of 25-34 year-olds whose highest level of education has a vocational orientation, by level of educational attainment (2022)

In per cent



1. Data for upper secondary attainment include completion of a sufficient volume and standard of programmes that would be classified individually as completion of intermediate upper secondary programmes (9% of adults aged 25-34 are in this group).

2. Year of reference differs from 2022. Refer to the source table for more details.

Countries are ranked in descending order of the share of 25-34 year-olds who attained vocational upper secondary, vocational post-secondary non-tertiary or vocational short-cycle tertiary education.

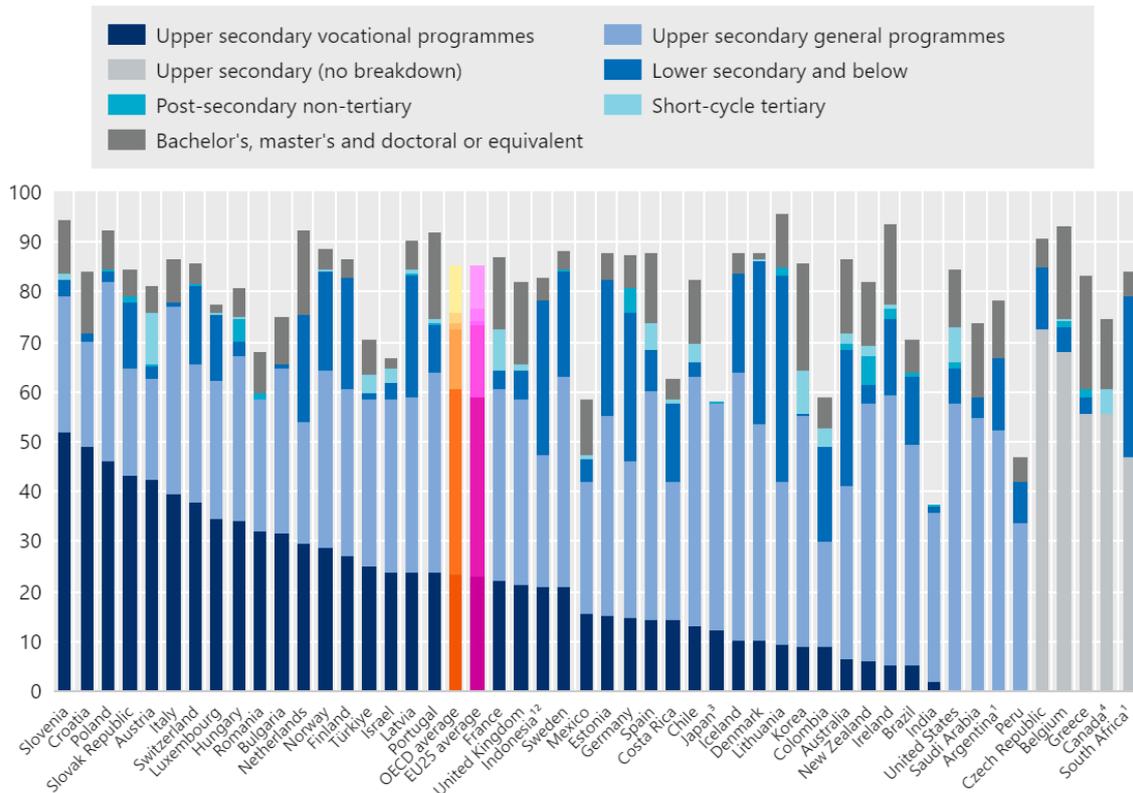
Source: OECD (2023), Table A1.3. For more information see *Source* section and [Education at a Glance 2023 Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes](#) (OECD, 2023<sup>[11]</sup>).

## Access to education, participation and progress

- Participation in high-quality early childhood education (ECE) has a positive effect on children's well-being, learning and development in the first years of their lives. In the United Kingdom, 50% of 2-year-olds are enrolled in ECE. This increases to 100% of 3 and 4-year-olds. At age 5, most children in the United Kingdom start primary education.
- The large majority of 15-19 year-olds across the OECD are enrolled in education. In the United Kingdom, 38% of this age group are enrolled in general upper secondary education and 21% in vocational upper secondary education. A further 5% are enrolled in lower secondary programmes and 18% in tertiary programmes. This compares to an OECD average of 37% enrolled in general upper secondary programmes, 23% in vocational upper secondary programmes, 12% in lower secondary programmes and 12% in tertiary programmes (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Enrolment rates of 15-19 year-olds, by level of education (2021)

In per cent



1. Year of reference differs from 2021: 2020 for Argentina and South Africa; 2018 for Indonesia.

2. Excludes students enrolled at tertiary levels.

3. Breakdown by age not available after 15 years old.

4. Excludes post-secondary non-tertiary education.

Countries are ranked in descending order of the share of students enrolled in upper secondary vocational education.

Source: OECD/UIS/Eurostat (2023), Table B1.2. For more information see [Source](#) section and [Education at a Glance 2023 Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes](#) (OECD, 2023<sup>[1]</sup>).

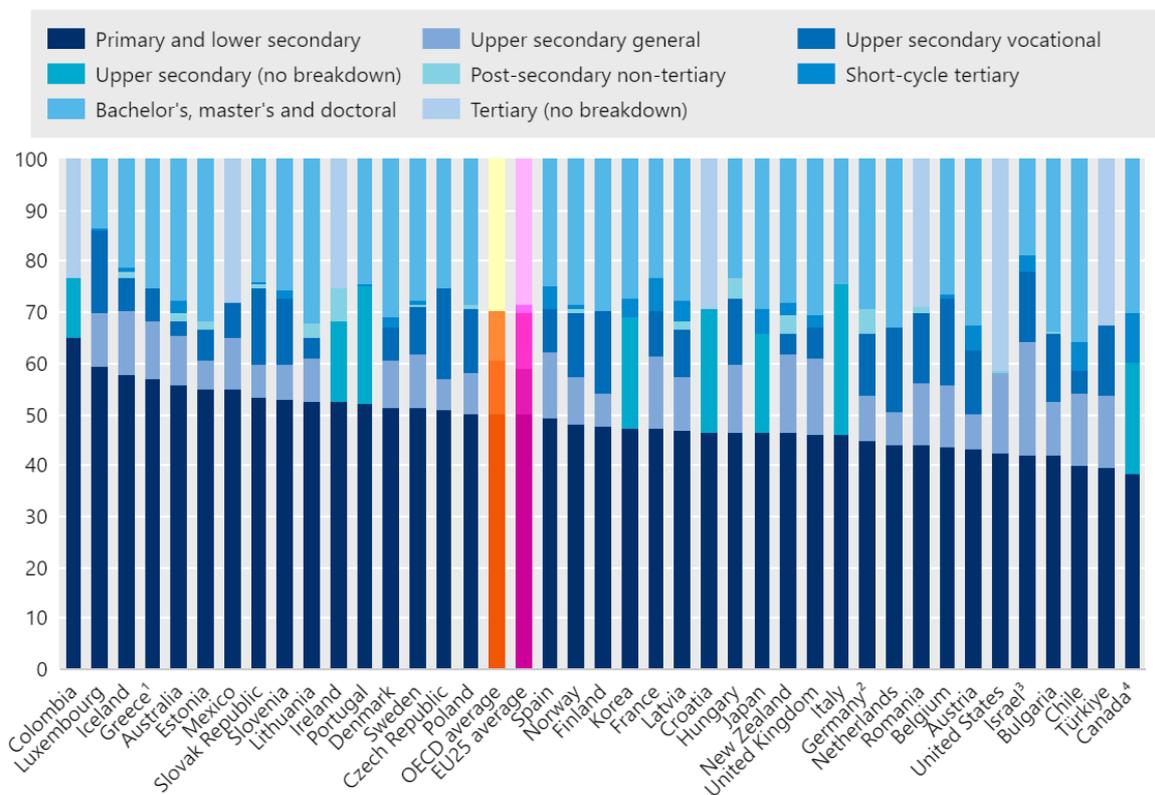
- Bachelor's programmes are the most popular programmes for new entrants to tertiary education. On average across the OECD, they attract 76% of all new students compared to 74% in the United Kingdom. Short-cycle tertiary programmes are the second most common level of education for new entrants into tertiary education, but their importance differs widely across countries. In the United Kingdom, they are chosen by 24% of all new entrants.
- Perhaps surprisingly, the share of international students at tertiary level has not been negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in many OECD countries. However, a few countries experienced double digit declines in the share of international students. The United Kingdom is not one of them, as the share of international students increased from 19% of all tertiary students in 2019 to 20% in 2021.

## Financial resources invested in education

- All OECD and partner countries devote a substantial share of their domestic output to education. In 2020, OECD countries spent on average 5.1% of their gross domestic product (GDP) on primary to tertiary educational institutions. In the United Kingdom, the corresponding share was 6.3% of GDP, of which 30% was dedicated to primary education, 16% to lower secondary education, 21% to upper secondary education, 2% to short-cycle tertiary programmes and 30% to bachelor's, master's and doctoral or equivalent programmes (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Total expenditure on primary to tertiary educational institutions, by level of education (2020)

In per cent



1. Year of reference differs from 2020. Refer to the source table for more details.

2. Upper secondary vocational programmes include lower secondary vocational programmes.

3. Upper secondary programmes include lower secondary programmes.

4. Primary education includes pre-primary programmes.

Countries are ranked in descending order of total expenditure on primary and lower secondary institutions.

Source: OECD/UIS/Eurostat (2023), Table C2.1. For more information see [Source section](#) and [Education at a Glance 2023 Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes](#) (OECD, 2023<sup>[1]</sup>).

- Funding for education in absolute terms is strongly influenced by countries' income levels. Countries with higher per capita GDP tend to spend more per student than those with lower per capita GDP. Across all levels from primary to tertiary education, the United Kingdom spends USD 16 052 annually per full-time equivalent student (adjusted for purchasing power), compared

to the OECD average of USD 12 647. Expenditure per student is equivalent to 33% of per capita GDP, which is above the OECD average of 27%.

- The COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented challenges for education systems across the world. On average across the OECD, expenditure on primary to tertiary educational institutions per full-time equivalent student (including expenditure on research and development) grew by 0.4% from 2019 to 2020 (the first year of the pandemic and the latest period with available data). In the United Kingdom, it decreased by 2.3%. This change in expenditure per student is the result of total expenditure on educational institutions decreasing by 0.8% and the total number of full-time equivalent students increasing by 1.5%.
- The distribution of spending between general and vocational upper secondary programmes depends on a variety of factors, such as the number of VET students, the fields of study within VET programmes and the importance given to VET relative to general programmes. In the United Kingdom, 15% of all funding for educational institutions is spent on general upper secondary education and 6% on vocational upper secondary education (11% and 10% respectively on average across the OECD).
- Government sources dominate non-tertiary education funding in all OECD countries, while the private sector contributes 9% of the total expenditure on educational institutions on average. Private funding in the United Kingdom accounted for 13% of expenditure at primary, secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary levels.
- In most countries, private sources accounted for similar shares of expenditure on general and vocational programmes at upper secondary level. However, in a few countries the differences in the share of private funding between general and vocational programmes were wider. In the United Kingdom, the private sector is responsible for 24% of expenditure on general upper secondary programmes and 8% of expenditure on vocational upper secondary programmes.
- On average across OECD countries, more than half of government expenditure on primary to post-secondary non-tertiary education comes from subnational governments. In the United Kingdom, 60% of the funding comes from the central government, after transfers between government levels and 40% from the local level.

## Teachers, the learning environment and the organisation of schools

- Teachers' salaries are an important determinant of the attractiveness of the teaching profession, but they also represent the single largest expenditure category in formal education. In most OECD countries, the salaries of teachers in public educational institutions increase with the level of education they teach, and also with experience. On average, annual statutory salaries for upper secondary teachers in general programmes with the most prevalent qualification and 15 years of experience are USD 53 456 across the OECD. In England (UK), the corresponding salary adjusted for purchasing power is USD 55 726, which is equivalent to GBP 42 820. In Scotland (UK), the corresponding salary adjusted for purchasing power is USD 55 096, which is equivalent to GBP 42 336.
- Between 2015 and 2022, statutory salaries of upper secondary teachers in general programmes (with the most prevalent qualification and 15 years of experience) declined in real terms in roughly half of all OECD countries with available data. In England (UK), upper secondary teachers' salaries decreased by 3% between 2015 and 2022. In Scotland (UK), upper secondary teachers' salaries increased by 6% between 2015 and 2022.
- On average across OECD countries, in full-time equivalent terms, there are 14 students for every teaching staff member in general upper secondary programmes and 15 students per staff member in vocational upper secondary programmes. In the United Kingdom, in full-time equivalent terms,

there are 16 students per staff member in general upper secondary programmes, higher than the OECD average. In vocational upper secondary programmes, in full-time equivalent terms, there are 25 students for every teaching staff member (above the OECD average).

- The average age of teachers varies across OECD countries. In some countries, the teaching workforce is much younger than the labour force in general, whereas in others, teachers tend to be older. In the United Kingdom, 18% of teachers in general upper secondary programmes are aged 50 or older, compared to the OECD average of 39%. Teachers in vocational programmes are older, with 46% aged 50 or above (43% on average across the OECD).
- National/central assessments (standardised tests with no consequence on students' progression through school or certification) are more common at primary and lower secondary levels than at upper secondary level, while most OECD countries conduct national/central examinations (standardised tests with formal consequence) in the final years of upper secondary education. These national/central assessments and examinations take place at different grades and can have different periodicities, their contents may vary over years and/or across students and are not necessarily compulsory for students. In England (UK), there are at least two national/central assessments at primary level, and none at lower secondary level. At upper secondary level, there are two national/central examinations that each student may be expected to take. In Scotland (UK), there are at least two national/central assessments at primary level, and one at lower secondary level. At upper secondary level, there is one national/central examination that each student may be expected to take.

## References

- OECD (2023), *Education at a Glance 2023 Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/d7f76adc-en>. [1]
- OECD (2023), Education at a Glance Database, <https://stats.oecd.org/>. [2]
- OECD (2023), *Education at a Glance 2023: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/e13bef63-en>. [3]

## More information

**For more information on *Education at a Glance 2023* and to access the full set of indicators, see:** <https://doi.org/10.1787/e13bef63-en>.

For more information on the methodology used during the data collection for each indicator, the references to the sources and the specific notes for each country, see *Education at a Glance 2023 Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes* (<https://doi.org/10.1787/d7f76adc-en>).

For general information on the methodology, please refer to the *OECD Handbook for Internationally Comparative Education Statistics 2018* (<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264304444-en>).

Updated data can be found on line at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eag-data-en> and by following the *StatLinks 2* under the tables and charts in the publication.

Explore, compare and visualise more data and analysis using the Education GPS:

<https://gpseducation.oecd.org/>.

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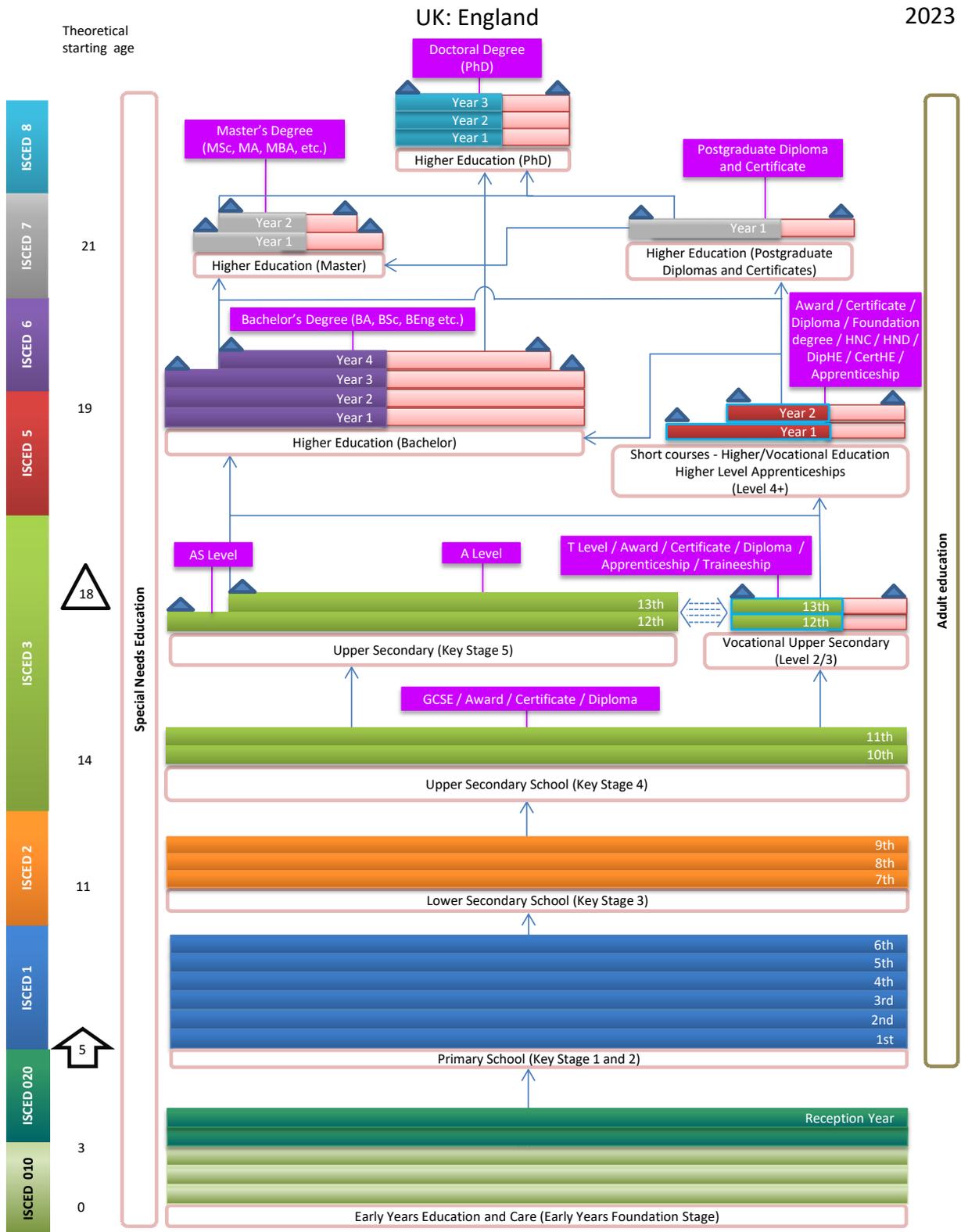
Key facts for the United Kingdom in *Education at a Glance 2023*

Indicator	Country		OECD average		Source	
Educational attainment of 25-34 year-olds by gender	2022		2022		Table A1.2	
	% Men	% Women	% Men	% Women		
	Below upper secondary	14%	11%	16%		12%
	Upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary	31%	28%	44%		35%
Tertiary	55%	61%	41%	54%		
NEET rates of 18-24 year-olds by gender	2022		2022		OECD (2023 <sup>[2]</sup> )	
	% Men	% Women	% Men	% Women		
	12.5%	11%	14%	15.5%		
Employment rates of 25-64 year-olds by educational attainment and gender	2022		2022		OECD (2023 <sup>[2]</sup> )	
	% Men	% Women	% Men	% Women		
	Below upper secondary	71%	55%	70%		48%
	Upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary	84%	74%	84%		69%
Tertiary	90%	84%	90%	83%		
Enrolment rate of children aged 3 in ECEC	2021		2021		Table B2.1	
	100%		73%			
Enrolment rate of 15-19 year-olds	2021		2021		Table B1.1	
	82%		84%			
Share of upper secondary students enrolled in VET programmes	2021		2021		Table B1.3	
	39%		44%			
Upper secondary completion rates by programme orientation	2021		2021		Table B3.1	
	General	Vocational	General	Vocational		
	By the end of the programme duration	m	m	77%		62%
Two years after the end of the programme duration	m	m	87%	73%		
Expenditure on educational institutions per full-time equivalent student by level of education (in USD PPP)	2020		2020		Table C1.1	
	Primary	USD 12 513	USD 10 658			
	Lower secondary	USD 12 716	USD 11 941			
	Upper secondary	USD 14 539	USD 12 312			
	Tertiary	USD 29 534	USD 18 105			
Total expenditure on primary to tertiary educational institutions as % of GDP	2020		2020		Table C2.1	
	6.3%		5.1%			
Share of total education expenditure on upper secondary educational institutions by programme orientation	2020		2020		Figure C2.2	
	General	Vocational	General	Vocational		
	15%	6%	11%	10%		
Total compulsory instruction time in primary and lower secondary education	2023		2023		Table D1.1	
	m		7 634 hours			
Statutory salaries of upper secondary teachers in general programmes with the most prevalent qualifications after 15 years of experience (in USD PPP)	2022		2022		Table D3.1.	
	USD 55 726 (England) USD 55 096 (Scotland)		USD 53 456			
Change in statutory salaries of upper secondary teachers in general programmes with the most prevalent qualifications after 15 years of experience (in real terms)	2015-2022		2015-2022		Table D3.7	
	-3% (England) 6% (Scotland)		4%			
Share of teachers in general upper secondary programmes aged 50 or older	2021		2021		Table D7.2.	
	18%		39%			

Note: The OECD average for completion rates reflects a different country coverage (see Indicator B3).

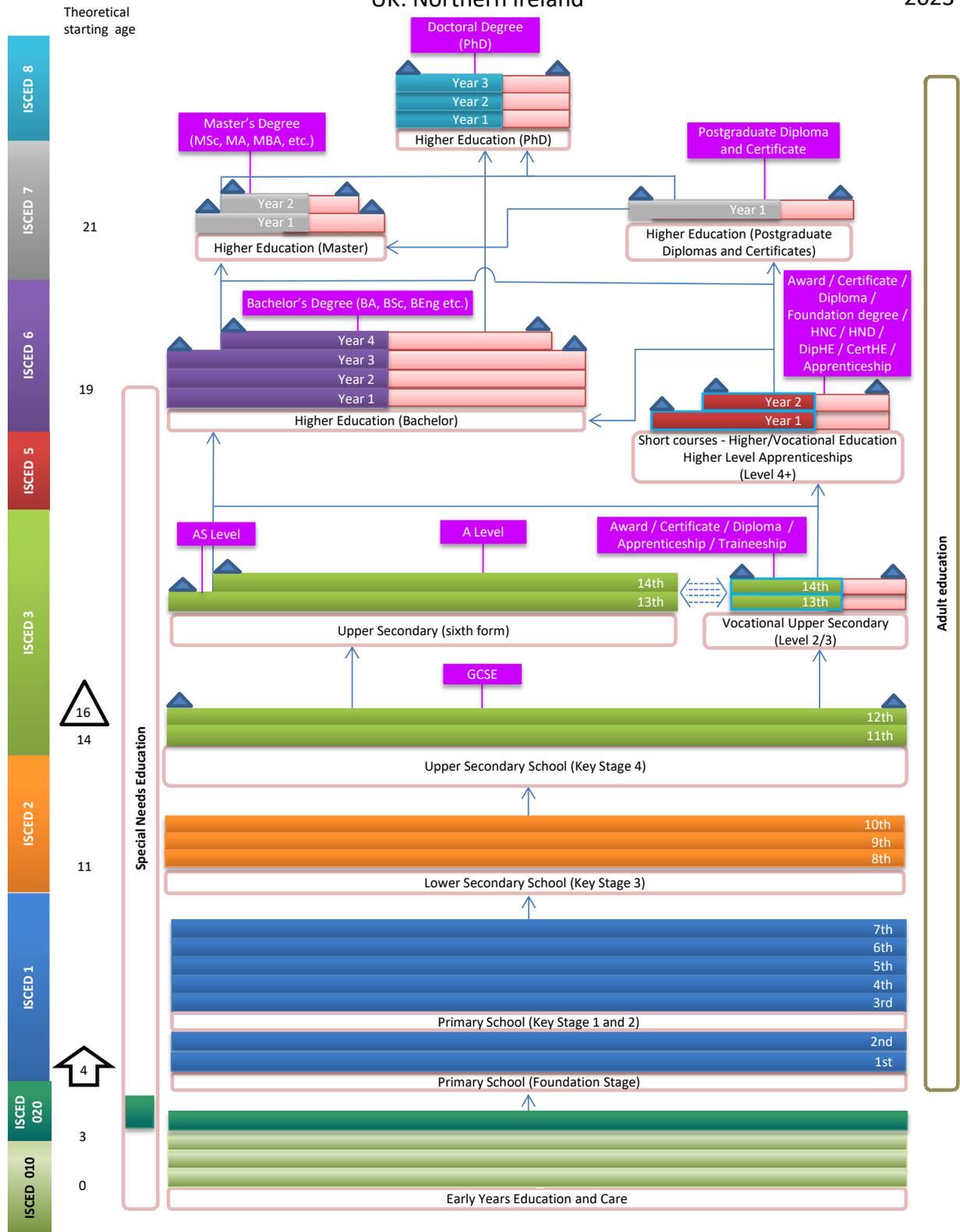
Source: OECD (2023<sup>[2]</sup>)

Diagram of the education system



UK: Northern Ireland

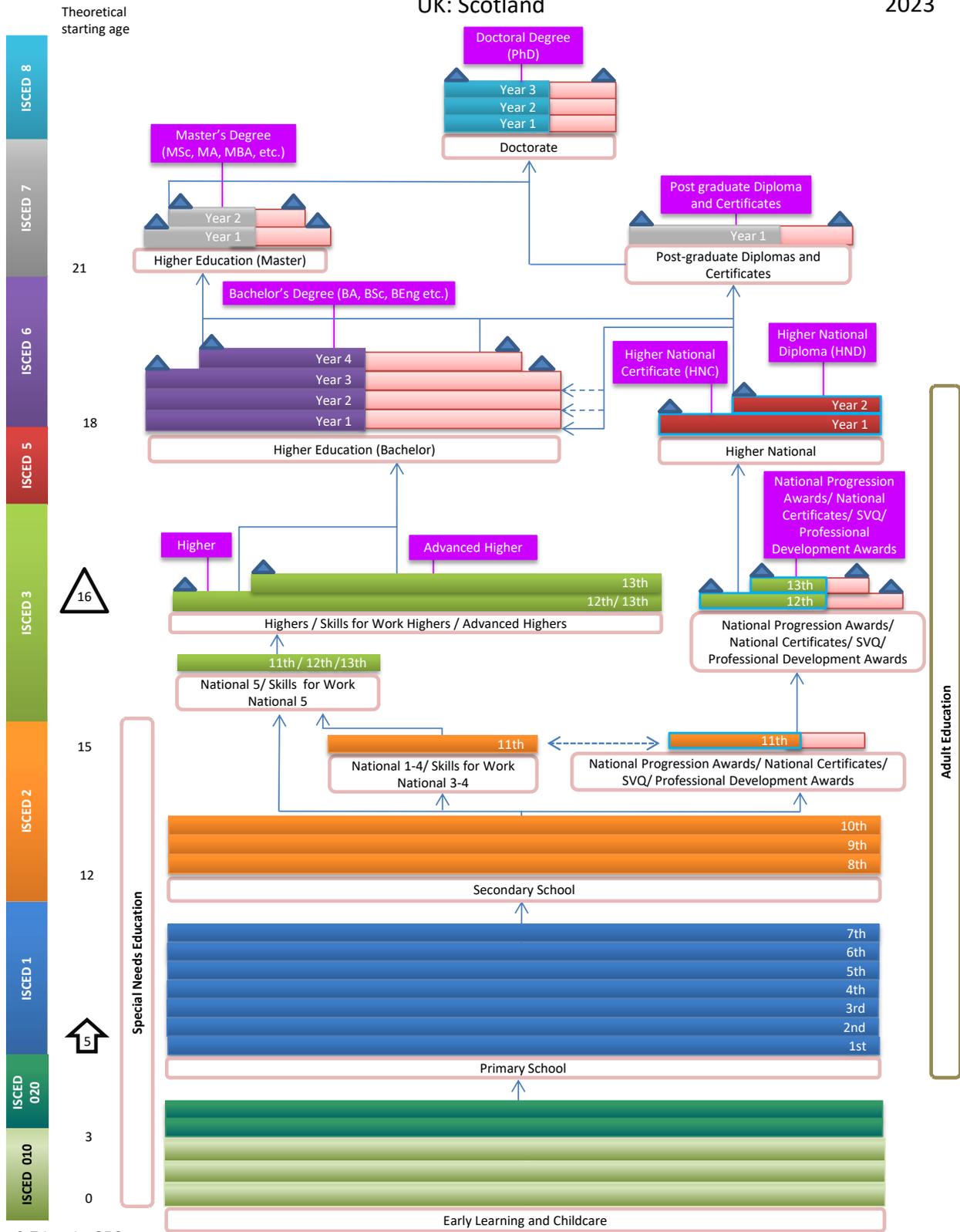
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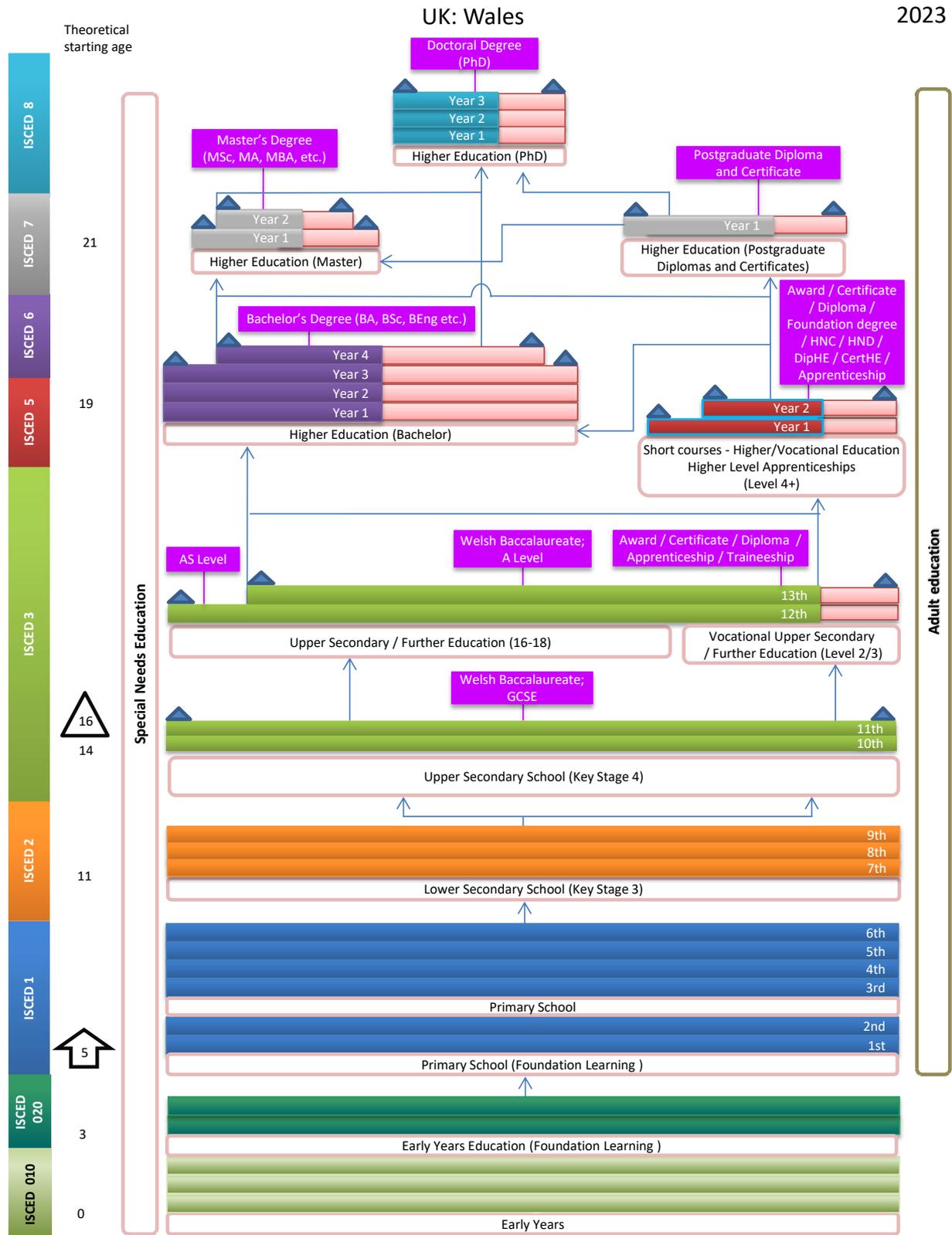
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Source: OECD (2023), "United Kingdom: Diagram of education system", OECD Education GPS, [http://gpseducation.oecd.org/Content/MapOfEducationSystem/GBR/GBR\\_2011\\_EN.pdf](http://gpseducation.oecd.org/Content/MapOfEducationSystem/GBR/GBR_2011_EN.pdf)  
 Please refer to "United Kingdom: Diagram of education system" for information on the keys.



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