

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN BRITISH AND CZECH EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS

Pre-reading questions

1. *What do you know about school systems abroad?*
2. *What are the advantages of going to school in the Czech Republic?*
3. *What improvements, if any, would you make to school or university education?*

1. School systems abroad are both similar and different at the same time. Children at a certain age are required by law to go to school, study compulsory subjects from September to the following June or July, and have their knowledge checked by certain assessment tasks. They have shorter or longer holidays in an academic year, a fact which is enjoyed both by pupils and teachers, but rather infuriates the parents of the children. In order to go on to a higher level of education, students have to comply with particular requirements, either pass entrance examinations or have concrete qualifications.

2. Some courses are free; the other ones have to be paid for. In most European countries the government provides for state-run school buildings, school canteens, heating, equipment, maintenance as well as for the teachers. To become a teacher, students have to study first at a faculty of education.

3. Primary education in Britain is similar to the first level of basic education in the Czech Republic. Children have one class-teacher each year and the emphasis in their classes is on language and mathematics. At about 11 they begin their secondary education at a comprehensive school, a grammar school or a high school. Some students, especially those hoping to go to university, stay at secondary school for the sixth form or go to a sixth-form college.

4. The differences are, e.g., in classroom organisation. In British schools most children sit around group-tables and do not all face the board, whereas in the Czech Republic most children sit in rows. The British system is quite good if children are working together on a project. However, the Czech system is much better if the teacher wants the children to listen and to pay attention. In Britain children very often talk all the time and teachers struggle to make them listen or concentrate on what they are doing. British pupils address their teacher Miss or Sir, or by their title and surname, or, which is becoming more popular in universities, by their first name only.

5. British pupils rarely have homework, which seems out of question in Czech environment. Schools usually have a playground attached, in the U.K. a large area equipped for sports, and students can go outside in lunch periods, play different games after their classes, have a snack or just relax on the grass. Czech students, on the other hand, can enjoy well-equipped computer rooms with the Internet access in most schools. In Britain, as in the Czech Republic, schools have a five-day week, but Czech pupils start at 8 a.m. and end around 1 p.m. Their British counterparts, as well as teachers, spend the day at school till three or four o'clock taking part in different clubs or after school activities. Czech pupils and teachers have subsidized school lunches of different taste and quality.

6. Any school has a number of more or less useful rules and regulations which have to be followed. In some British schools wearing uniformed clothes is necessary. Czech schools do not insist on wearing a particular type of clothes only that it is tidy and clean; however they require their pupils to change shoes upon arrival at school. Of course, smoking or alcohol use is prohibited in school premises. At least for the students!

7. Cooperation of school authorities, parents and school boards can be very helpful. Parents can meet teachers and discuss their children's progress not only at regular parents' evenings; they can even make decisions about the school program and courses, curriculum, school budget, etc.
8. The National Curriculum in all state schools in England and Wales requires attainment targets to be set within each subject and pupils' progress is checked at the ages of 7, 11 and 14 when they complete standard assessment tasks (SATs). Pupils are graded into eight levels for all subjects except art, music and physical education. At the age of 16 pupils take GCSE exams, which are also based on material covered in the National Curriculum.
9. Some British children can go to independent schools run by private organizations. A few can attend public schools, such as Eton or Cheltenham Ladies' College. The parents have to pay fees that may amount to several thousand pounds a year. Despite their name, public schools are not part of the state education system.
10. The secondary school system seems to be better organized in the Czech Republic. Students have a much wider range of secondary schools to choose from, e.g., technical, business, medical, agricultural, and vocational schools which prepare students for particular professions, jobs or trades. The majority of students take *maturita* – school leaving examination – at eighteen. The Czech *gymnázium* is the most academic of the Czech secondary schools and generally prepares students for university entrance.
11. In Britain, students who want to go into higher (or university level) education must study for their 'A' (or 'Advanced') level examinations. Courses begin at the age of sixteen (the official school leaving age) and students usually study two or three subjects for two years – either at the same school if it has a 'sixth form', or more usually at a special 'sixth form college'. In Scotland students take the Scottish Certificate of Education.
12. One of the biggest differences between British and Czech education is in the examination system. In Britain students take state examinations in about nine or ten GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) subjects at the age of sixteen, and about three 'A' level subjects at eighteen. These examinations are public, which means that they are generally the same for all students and marked independently by licensed examining authorities, not the schools. This also means that the results are more objective. One significant advantage of this for British students is that they do not need to take separate university entrance examinations – unlike their Czech counterparts – because most British universities (except Oxford or Cambridge) offer places according to 'A' Level grades alone.
13. University 'undergraduate' courses in Britain usually last for three years and are for bachelor degrees only. This is seen as the main university diploma and students graduate only after passing intensive 'Final' examinations. These typically involve 25–30 hours of written examinations spread over a two to three week period, and the submission of a long dissertation or project. Only a relatively small number of more able or interested students go on to study for masters (or higher, 'postgraduate') degrees. These last for one or two years and are much more specialised and intensive than in the Czech system.
14. Some experts on school education say that the similar Czech two-tier system will boost the number of graduates and, therefore, more graduates will mean more qualified work force, promotion of employability and mobility within EU countries. Bachelor graduates will be able to start their career after three years of study. However, some Czechs are known to be obsessed with degrees and will not be able to stop until a fancy title is put before their name.
15. One large disadvantage for British university students is the cost of their studies. Tuition fees are not paid for by the government anymore. Apart from that, there are no free grants to cover living expenses. Most students therefore have to work in part-time jobs, take out costly loans, or rely on their parents for support. Many people consider this both unfair and discriminatory against students from poorer, more working class homes.

^{16.} On the other hand, it is also argued that university graduates have a much greater chance of earning bigger salaries and that it is therefore fair for them to repay loans, especially those loans which only have to be paid once the graduate is in full-time employment.

^{17.} Czech politicians speak in favour of imposing tuition fees at universities. They argue that ‘for some young people university studies are just a way of avoiding work for another few years’. They argue that reasonable tuition fees – annual fees between CZK 9,000 and 15,000 depending on the course of study – would make students more responsible and allow universities to grow. Students unable to pay would qualify for student loans from banks or other creditors. The government would guarantee the loans and students would be required to repay them after graduation, but not until their earnings reached the national average.

^{18.} One criticism of such plans is that they would tend to discourage students from poorer families from going to university, especially since Czech students, like their British counterparts, already have to pay for their own living expenses. Furthermore, the idea of imposing tuition fees seems to be universally unpopular among rich and poor students alike, who regard it as unfair and somewhat anti-educational.

^{19.} Another criticism is that adding tuition fees into the budgets of state-run higher educational institutions in the Czech Republic would make only a marginal difference to their financial situations. So, how to cut the Gordian knot of Czech higher education?

^{20.} One solution could be in letting state-run institutions remain tuition-free and in establishing private colleges and universities which would have the right to charge money for schooling.

After-reading questions

Scan the text and answer the following questions:

1. In which way is primary education in Britain similar to the Czech one?
2. What are the main differences in Czech and British secondary school systems?
3. How will the two-tier system promote employability within EU countries?
4. What are the arguments of supporters of tuition fees at Czech universities?