American high students who want to study at a college or university have to take a standardized test: the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) or the ACT (American College Test). Each college or university decides on the minimum score it will accept.

In the US there are also private schools where students have to pay. 10% of American children attend these schools. They are very similar to British “public” schools.

Finally, after secondary school many British students go to university. They apply to several universities and receive offers of a place on condition that they achieve certain grades in their A levels. A first degree, which is usually an honours degree, generally takes three years, although it may take longer. Most courses end with exams called “finals”. Graduates may add the letters BA (Bachelor of Arts) or BSc (Bachelor of Science) after their names. There are also BEng (Bachelor of Engineering), BEd (Bachelor of Education), etc. The students’ results are given as classes or grades: a first is the highest class, seconds are often split between upper second and lower second, and below that is a third. After finishing their degree, some graduates go on to study for a further degree, often a master’s degree or a doctorate.

Students in Britain formerly had their tuition fees paid by the state and received a government grant to help pay their living expenses. Now, they receive only a loan towards their expenses, and from 1999 they have to pay their tuition fees. When they finish their degree, they have to pay their loans back.

People who do not go to university can do vocational training. It is intended to give people the skills and knowledge they need to perform a particular job, and involves practical instruction as well as theory. Most vocational training takes place not in universities but in colleges of further education and in colleges specializing in art, accountancy, etc.

In the US, people talk about “going to college” even if the institution they attend is a university. Most colleges offer classes only for undergraduate students studying for a bachelor’s degree. Community colleges are institutions which offer two-year courses leading to an associate’s degree, and afterwards students transfer to a different college or university to finish their studies. Universities are larger than colleges and also offer courses for graduate students who study in a graduate school. Most of the degrees last for four years.

In the US there are no national qualifications like GNVQs in the UK, though some professional organizations decide on their own qualifications and some of these have become widely accepted. Many vocational training is done by private institutions which are sometimes called proprietary schools.

Another aspect of British education which differs from the Spanish system is the inspections. They are carried out by the OFSTED (office for the standards in education). There are over 28.000 inspectors in England and Wales. The aim of OFSTED is to improve standards in teaching and learning in all of the state-funded schools in England. Inspectors visit schools and produce a detailed report on every aspect of school life. This will be freely available for the public to view. For this reason, schools are continually trying to improve and there is fierce competition.