

Over 200,000 international students study in higher education institutions in the UK each year and, for many, their first introduction to student life is through an academic preparation or English for academic purposes (EAP) course. These courses enable students to improve their language skills up to the level required for entry into university, as well as providing them with the chance to experience student life in the UK and learn the study skills necessary to succeed at a British university or college.

"[Academic preparation courses are] extremely important when the student hasn't got the skills necessary to survive at university," says Maria Ferreira, from Yes! Students Agency in Brazil. "Brazilian schools don't prepare students for this. Those skills, in my opinion, are language skills; listening [skills]; speaking clearly [and] consistently; arguing logically [and] giving oral presentations; writing essays; and library and internet researching. If [a client] hasn't lived abroad I'll recommend that they do a course like this so that they will develop [these] skills and consequently have an easier ride through university."

Tracy Tang, Marketing Director of Lai-Yin Educational Advisory Services in Taiwan, reports that 90 per cent of her clients going on to study on a university undergraduate course in the UK participate in an academic preparation course of some kind beforehand. "IEAP courses help students get used to the English environment. This builds up their confidence before actually encountering the real academic work."

Academic preparation courses cover various aspects of university study, as well as English language skills, and can vary in length from one month to one year depending on a student's language ability prior to starting the course. Common subject areas include seminar presentation, essay writing, use of the library and IT resources, taking notes in lectures and reading reference books. Some university courses also offer students academic tuition in the subject area they intend to enrol on, which can involve studying alongside other UK students at the university.

According to Claire Kane, Development Officer at the Centre for English Language Teaching at the University of Ulster in Northern Ireland, preparation courses are increasingly being required to teach more information technology skills. "PowerPoint and presentation skills, word processing, databases [and] internet for research [are all required]," she says.

Courses are available at universities, further education colleges and language schools throughout the UK, and the decision about where to study is usually determined by the choice of university students eventually want to study in. Schools and colleges may have agreements with local universities which can help international students gain entry on the successful completion of their course. "We have a very

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Academic prep

English for academic purposes (EAP), or academic preparation, courses have played an important role in preparing international students for higher education in the UK for a long time. Recent international student trends at UK universities mean that their popularity looks set to continue.

good relationship with several local universities and can guarantee entry to Huron American University in London, subject to entry requirements," says Kevin McNally, Principal of the Hampstead School of English in London.

Universities often provide their own academic preparation courses, known as pre-sessional courses, and offer students a place at the university on successful completion of the course, as long as academic requirements are met.

"One-hundred per cent of those students enrolled on the pre-sessional EAP course are going on to either postgraduate or undergraduate study at the University of Ulster," says Kane.



Selection of institutions providing EAP courses in the UK

Anglolang Academy, Scarborough; Barnet College, London; Hampstead School of English, London; Harrogate Tutorial College, Harrogate; Leicester Square School of English, London; Sidmouth International College, Sidmouth; University of Kent, Canterbury; University of Leicester, Leicester; University of Nottingham, Nottingham; University of Ulster, Northern Ireland

"Upon successful completion of the pre-sessional course, students are deemed to have the university entry requirement of 5.5 Ielts for undergraduate study."

However, international students who have already gained a place at the university of their choice and have the required language level are also encouraged to participate in a short pre-sessional course before starting their university studies.

"[Academic preparation courses are] very important, even for students who have met the language conditions, if they want to hit the ground running," says Roger Smith, Deputy Director of the Centre for English Language Education at the University of Nottingham. "Apart from the training in

language and study skills, these courses help to familiarise students with the cultural expectations inherent within UK higher education contexts. If international students are going to fail or really struggle with their courses, it's usually because they fall behind in semester one and never really catch up. A good pre-sessional course at the place where the student is going to study is the best preparation the student can have."

Many institutions have noticed an increase in the number of students enrolling on their preparation courses in recent years, with the largest numbers coming from Asia. "[We have noticed] a huge increase in Chinese student applications. Sixty to 70 per cent of all students are now from the Far Eastern countries," says Tony Pearson, Director of the International Office at the University of Leicester.

The wide gap between the education and social culture of the UK compared with many Asian countries means that preparation courses are particularly popular with Asian students. "It is extremely valuable for [students] to be able to acclimatise to the UK, particularly where differences in academic culture are concerned, [for example] the Far East and Middle East," says Pearson.

However, many other nationalities find preparation courses useful too. "European students are more similar to British students," says Michael Hughes, School Director of Teaching and Learning at the English Language Unit in the University of Kent. "But there tends to be a north-south divide in Europe with northern Europeans being more used to independent study. All students find the student social life in Britain very different to that at home."

Academic preparation courses are becoming increasingly popular with Chinese students who are enrolling in higher education courses in the UK in growing numbers. According to Tom Kane from UKEAS in China, preparation courses are very important to Chinese students wanting to undertake university studies in the UK. "Since there are a number of differences in the education system between China and the UK, in particular the number of years of compulsory education, academic preparation courses are a necessary stepping stone for Chinese students," says Kane. "[Chinese students wanting to study abroad] share an incredible desire to get ahead of the perceived competition in China." ○

Where to study?

"Students often prefer the individual attention of a small language school like ourselves to the more impersonal atmosphere of a large pre-sessional programme in a university," says Linda Polkowski, Director of Studies at Anglolang Academy in Scarborough.

The widespread availability of EAP courses around the UK can make it difficult for a student to decide where to study. Students who already have a conditional place at a university dependent on improving their English level, may find that attending a pre-sessional course at the same institution is an obvious decision. "The students get to know the institution and its culture before starting the course," says Maria Ferreira, from Yes! Students Agency in Brazil.

Many language schools and colleges have strong links with local universities or can provide information and advice about different universities in the UK, which can be helpful for students who have not yet decided where to study. "We have an advisor from the British University Placement Scheme who comes into the school to advise students. This is a privately run organisation that offers free advice to students on all educational matters," says Neelisha Vadher, Marketing Manager at Leicester Square School of English in London.