

feature

Preparing for UK high school

High school preparation courses in the UK can make all the difference to students about to embark on a long-term mainstream education programme.

High school or boarding school preparation programmes – unlike university preparation courses, which are offered by many language schools countrywide in the UK – are largely confined to international study centres attached to independent schools or specialist centres. However, this may change as demand for such courses appears to be growing, according to course directors in this field.

"We have been offering a one-year intensive language course for students wishing to access the sixth form for four years now," says Nicky Whitefield Smith from Moira House Girls School in Eastbourne. "The idea came from demand. Girls from abroad wanted to get into the sixth form but were not up to the required language level and felt a one-month summer school would not give them the skills they needed."

High school preparation courses vary widely in course content and length and at Students International in Melton Mowbray, students are offered the chance to gain academic and language qualifications, including the Cambridge exams, Ielts, AS levels and international GCSEs in a range of subjects, while in the preparation course. Alison Blythe, Director of the school, says that the course is popular with Chinese students who are "keen to succeed in order to obtain a place at a British school or university".

St Clares in Oxford offers a preparatory course for clients interested in taking the International Baccalaureate (IB). The course may be taken because a student lacks English language skills or "subject-specific preparation", explains Richard Gorst at the school. He relates, "Yang Liu came to us with poor English and would not have been allowed to start on the IB. Her year on the pre-IB [offered on a modular basis] put her in a position where she could maximise her score. She has just gone to Imperial College."

Preparation courses generally ensure that students have the linguistic

and academic ability to cope in mainstream education. However, meeting the emotional needs of younger students in a foreign country is also important. Grazyna Sutherland from Sutherland Education in Surbiton says that they started offering high school preparation courses three years ago after identifying a gap in the market. "There was no proper provision for students leaving the family home and going into boarding [schools], where they would often struggle linguistically, feel very homesick, sometimes suffering from culture shock and not benefiting from the boarding environment," she says.

Students at Sutherland Education receive intensive English instruction combined with mainstream subject tutorials while staying with an English family. Sutherland adds, "We have found that, in this way, the rate of progress is phenomenally high and students become more confident in their linguistic skills, more aware of cultural sensitivities and learn what to expect from boarding."

Those programmes that are not affiliated with a particular institution usually help match students to a suitable school environment. Kit Bithrey-George at the Royal School in Haslemere says that a place at their own mainstream school is not guaranteed. "However, we have excellent relationships with a number of schools and work very hard to find the right school for each student," she says. "To date, all international students have either been offered a place in our own main school or elsewhere."

Sutherland, too, says that all their students eventually go on to mainstream schooling. In some cases, students who already have a place may be referred to Sutherland Education by the schools themselves. "Our courses are very popular with... boarding schools, who refer to us – for a period of a few weeks or one or two terms – students not able to acclimatise easily or [who are] struggling linguistically."