

Firm foundations

Academic preparation courses on offer in the UK are improving and diversifying as language schools and universities cash in on increased demand.

More and more universities and language schools in the UK are expanding their course range with academic preparation courses, including both short-term, pre-sessional courses for students about to embark on their first year of university or longer length foundation courses for those wanting to hone their language and academic skills before applying to a university in the UK.

Pam Stubbs from University College Worcester says that they only started offering such courses fairly recently but have already expanded their course range. "[Our] International Undergraduate Foundation Diploma is successfully running in its third year, [while an] International Masters Preparation Diploma course [will be] available from September 2004," she says.

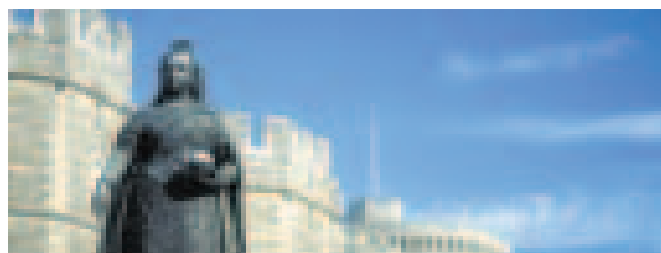
Beet Language Centre in Bournemouth is another recent entrant into this sector of the international education market. According to Mark Long at the school, academic preparation studies were offered in response to a specific demand. "In 2002, we started a foundation course to provide students with the additional year's secondary education required for students from countries such as China, whose high school

qualification is not widely recognised as meeting the general entry requirements for British universities," he explains.

With the rapid expansion in the number of Chinese applying to study in UK universities, demand for academic preparation courses has never been higher and many institutions report that Chinese students make up a large percentage of their intake on these courses. "China is still one of the largest markets because of the demand for higher education studies in the UK," says Justine Hinton-Lever from the English Language Teaching Centre at the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST).

However, Hinton-Lever also reports a recent decline in Chinese numbers for their one-year preparation courses. "[I am] not sure of the reason," she says. "[It] could be Sars, or visa restrictions [meaning] students spend more time learning English in China and shorten their time spent on university preparation courses in the UK."

Sarah Wall from Anglolang Academy of English in Scarborough has noticed a similar trend on their new foundation programme for business students that began in January. "Initially we believed that our main market



would be China so we marketed the course in China through exhibitions and agents," she relates. "However, we realised that Chinese students were finding it difficult to get a visa to study at a language school in the UK. Recently it has come to light that in China there is a growing trend for in-country courses being delivered by UK teachers [and this is] clearly a cheaper option for the students."

With a possible decline or levelling off of Chinese student numbers on the horizon, schools and universities need to make sure that they appeal to a broad range of markets and there is evidence that some institutions are varying the content of their courses in response to changing student demand.

Julie Lewis from the Language Centre at Leeds University in Leeds says that their academic preparation course is now more geared towards IELTS preparation "because of student pressure", while their summer pre-sessional

courses now involve more of a slant towards "speaking, writing and culture".

Peter Liu from Beijing Wiseway agency in China believes that offering targeted academic preparation courses is a good way for universities to attract international students. "We've seen some universities offer different modules for foundation courses – law, engineering, business, IT, media, etc," he says. "Now, foundation courses are more diversified and comprehensive rather than simply language training."

Mark Henwood from MLS International College in Bournemouth notes that a number of universities in the UK are raising their IELTS requirements due to an observation that "students at 6.0 or 6.5 still struggle to keep pace with their English counterparts". He asserts, "Ability to communicate effectively in the English language remains one of the main pre-requisites for success for international students studying at UK universities."