

Uni prep in the UK

University foundation courses are becoming an increasingly important part of university study in the UK for overseas students. Bethan Norris looks at developments in this sector.

With international interest in UK degree programmes higher than ever before, the business of preparing overseas students for university study is booming, with a wide range of general and specialist courses to choose from.

Nigel Addison from Bellerbys College, which has centres throughout the UK, says, "Bellerbys has been offering [university foundation courses] for 10 years now with numbers increasing by about 10 per cent each year." Shane Wilkinson from Bournemouth Business School International (BBSI) adds, "There is constantly increasing demand for foundation [courses], and in particular for specialised [courses]."

BBSI offers nine separate foundation programmes, each specifically tailored for students' future academic interests. These include management and business administration, marketing and public relations, medical sciences, law and aviation studies to name but a few and, according to Wilkinson, the school has adapted the courses to meet student requirements by adding "new subjects and [becoming] more flexible in terms of entry dates".

At Bell International in Cambridge, students are offered a single foundation programme that "prepares prospective undergraduates for a wide range of degree courses through its choice of elective modules", says Fiona Wilkinson at the school. Compulsory core modules include general English, information technology and academic skills, as well as life in Britain – which covers aspects of British history, the development of cultural identities and contemporary British society – while elective modules depend on individual interests.

Most schools or colleges offering university foundation programmes are part of or have strong links to one or more universities in the UK, and this is a key reason for their increasing popularity. Rachel Kimber from Aspect Education, which has various centres offering foundation courses around the UK, says, "Universities are happier than ever before to accept foundation year students instead of A-levels."

Students completing the foundation year programme at Aspect have their course validated by the University of Portsmouth, although Kimber points out, "Our university and college placement service helps place students at any institution, not just Portsmouth."

Studying in higher education in the UK is an expensive business and most students are keen to achieve their academic

goals in the shortest time possible. At Stevenson College in Edinburgh, students who complete the international foundation studies and advanced higher programme with good passes may be accepted directly into the second year of certain university degree courses, according to Seonaid McNicoll at the college. She adds that many students study at local universities after a "smooth transition" from the college.

While foundation students may find the transition to university study easier if they progress on to one of the universities with agreements with their college or school, most courses are designed so that successful completion makes students eligible for entry at any UK university. "Since we started running foundations in 1995, all BBSI students who have successfully completed their foundations have progressed to universities in the UK," relates Wilkinson.

The skills learnt on university foundation courses are valuable for university study in all countries, especially as improving IELTS test scores is often a key component of a foundation programme. Kimber points out, "The vast majority [of students] do go on to university in the UK but some return to their studies in their home country, [or] on to US and Australian universities too."



PHOTOGRAPH: BRITISH STUDY CENTRES

Overseas marketing

Foundation courses are traditionally popular with students from Asia, where academic study skills often differ substantially from those in the UK. According to Fiona Wilkinson from Bell International, "Students have been primarily from the Far East and Middle East markets but increasingly we are enrolling students from Europe and Russia," while Rachel Kimber from Aspect Education adds, "Some Western Europeans do take the course as a more challenging 'year out' of their own studies/lives."

Schools and colleges offering foundation courses generally use a wide variety of marketing techniques, with agents being an important part of the mix. "We are currently looking to increase our network of specialist consultants because they offer a highly specialised and valuable service in personal advice, course information, and career and education guidance," says Wilkinson.

The progressive nature of foundation courses means that students need to have some idea of where and what they want to study to ensure that a course caters to their individual needs, and education agents are often invaluable in helping with these choices.

Combining agent usage with other marketing techniques is typical. "We participate in both local fairs and fairs organised by the British Council," says Kimber. "Aspect staff [travel to do] presentations together with our agents."

Selection of institutions offering university foundation courses in the UK

Name	Location	Pay agency commission	No. of students on foundation course
Aspect Education	various	✓	150
Bell International	Cambridge	✓	19
Bellerbys College	various	✓	450
Bournemouth Business School International	Bournemouth	✓	100
British Study Centres	Oxford	✓	20
Park Lane College	Leeds	✓	50
Stevenson College	Edinburgh	✓	30
University of Stirling	Stirling	✓	70