

Learning English at UK high schools

International students at UK high schools make up a small but significant sector in the country's international education industry. Many independent schools in the UK are taking a look at how to maximise their international student intake with dedicated EFL and other facilities. **BETHAN NORRIS** reports.

International students can contribute much to independent schools in the UK, both in terms of the fees they pay and also by increasing diversity within the school body. The latest statistics from the Independent Schools Council shows that international students made up four per cent of the total members' school body in 2008 and the number of new international students increased by five per cent on 2007.

International student enrolments have been increasing steadily in the last few years, mainly as a result of increased marketing by UK schools. Many schools now recognise the value of having a strong international student body and the use of agents is becoming commonplace. The first British Boarding Schools Workshop

(BBSW), which is an agent workshop specifically for UK schools, was held in 2006 and has gone from strength to strength since then. This year it was held on two separate dates for the first time and at the most recent event in March, 48 schools took part.

But to attract and retain international

students of any number, schools need to have the facilities and course options to suit international students' particular needs. EFL provision and a dedicated international study centre is often the minimum an international student will expect when paying to study at a UK high school and development in this area has been particularly impressive at some schools.

What's on offer

Steven Jandrell, Headmaster at Queen Ethelburga's in York, says that international numbers at the school have been growing year on year and as such EFL provision has had to expand. "The international department has recently been relocated to more spacious

accommodation in the new multi-million pound Genesis Centre so the commitment to teaching greater numbers of international students is assured for some time to come," he says.

At St Leonards Mayfield School in East Sussex too, the Esol department, which is in the main body of the school, has increased from one teacher to three in the last few years, according to Tim Eaton, Director of Development and Communications at the school. As EFL needs vary according to the age and educational background of the student, Eaton explains that language provision varies from pupil to pupil. Currently 85 per cent of non-native English speakers at the school require EFL tuition, which consists of "eight lessons focusing on improving students' language skills in all areas, thus enabling them to access the main curriculum with greater ease", says Eaton.

Enhancing English language learning through add-on facilities is also important at some schools. Eaton says that international students are encouraged to use the self study English language programmes that are available on all school computers, while Jandrell adds, "The library is well stocked with self study IELTS books, readers and other examination text books. In addition, we also provide additional private tuition on demand and extensive welfare support with the full-time employment of a Chinese liaison officer."

Exam courses

Provision of international language and academic exams is also important and becoming a key role of international study centres at UK high schools. The range of



PHOTOGRAPH: ST LEONARDS-MAYFIELD SCHOOL

exams on offer is extensive and growing with many international students juggling mainstream academic examinations alongside UK students with other EFL qualifications. Jandrell says, "We offer intensive general and academic English with a range of English as an Acquired Language (EAL) examinations, ranging from Cambridge Key English Test (KET) through to the Certificate for Proficiency in English (CPE). We also offer the IELTS test on demand for students from years 10 upwards, with intensive tuition for this vital examination. In addition, for those lower level students, we also provide the Trinity College London Graded English Spoken Examinations and the IGCSE English both first and second language."

The ISC statistics show that four out of five international students at independent schools in the UK will eventually go on to higher education in the country and as such, IELTS provision is very important for many. Janine Faulkner from Saint Michael's College in Worcestershire says that IELTS has taken over from the Cambridge examination in popularity among their international students and Richard Gorst from St Clare's International College in Oxford agrees. "The

convenience of IELTS certainly outweighs the probably more thorough testing of a Cambridge examination," he says. "All our foundation course students will sit an IELTS examination if they are making an application to a UK university."

Foundation and academic preparation courses are also becoming increasingly important for high schools in attracting international students. St Clare's in Oxford offers two programmes for students, the >>



Agent views

There are a number of key student markets for UK high schools, with Hong Kong students making up 27 per cent of the international student population and other important source markets being Germany, Africa, North America and China. We asked a range of agents what their students particularly liked about high school education in the UK and how they thought EFL provision had developed in this sector in recent years.

Annette Lee from Super Talent in Hong Kong says that for Chinese parents, the good academic reputation of UK high schools is all important for future educational goals. "If the school is able to demonstrate that it has a strong link to courses in medicine and law at higher education level, it would certainly be helpful," she says. "Chinese parents are also looking at ranking and examination results but not so much on extra-curricular activities."

For German students, however, extra-curricular activities such as sport or music are valued in choosing a high school in the UK. Alan Fox from Shrewsbury Education Service in the UK, which organises educational programmes with EFL for international students in Shropshire, says that German students particularly appreciate the more relaxed atmosphere of secondary education in the country. "It appears that teachers praise rather than criticise and this is received positively by the students," he says.

The value of gaining EFL qualifications during their studies is also important according to Fox. "All our students take Cambridge examinations," he says. "Parents in Germany appreciate the value of such diplomas and because exams can be taken at the end of each term, all students, >>

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whether on a short or long course, are in position to obtain them."

Dahlia Long from Aston Group in Hong Kong says that the advent of international study centres at UK high schools has opened another market for the sector. "Students who tend to be weak in English language may not have had the opportunity to enter good UK high schools in the past," she says. "With international study centres, students are able to obtain the EFL support they need and at the same time enjoy a UK education." She adds that IELTS exams are very popular with her students. "Based on our experience, IELTS is still deemed as the language exam for international students. Although there are many other English exams that are listed by Ucas as acceptable [for entry] to UK universities, IELTS is still widely promoted compared to other English exams."

International Baccalaureate – which attracts both international and domestic students – and a university foundation course (UFC) for international students wanting to go on to university. Gorst says, "The first module of our UFC concentrates on integrated language and examination skills. The academic studies in either business or international affairs are introduced in the second two modules from November to May. The growth in demand for foundation courses has been, to my mind, the most exciting development in the EFL industry in recent times."

Short courses

Summer language programmes and short "taster" academic courses are another area of development for UK high schools. Such courses take place throughout the year in many cases and can be a good way of introducing international students to the concept of a British boarding school education. "We do offer the opportunity for students to do just English while they are with us in the academic year," says Faulkner. "We do encourage them, however, to also follow some academic subjects, normally ones where English language levels are not so important – maths, sciences etc."

At Bell Bedgebury International School, which is owned and operated by Bell Educational Trust – an established international English language provider – short-term language programmes are a key part of course provision. "Young learners can choose from a variety of language courses which take place at holiday times in the

winter, spring, summer and autumn," says Natalie Dawe at the school. "We also run Project UK, a special programme for groups of children from the same school, which integrates English language learning with tuition on a topic or specific subject. Each course is tailor-made to meet the needs of the group and consolidates school work."

New trends

As the boundary between academic and English language provision becomes more blurred at UK high schools, the scope for a greater range of courses increases. Dawe says that Bell's aim is to "increase the number of students and the range of courses available at Bell Bedgebury International School" and she adds, "All of these courses will be supported by Bell's expertise in English language teaching."

Bell Bedgebury has already introduced new courses to the portfolio and Eric Squires, Headmaster of the school, says that these have been very successful. "This summer we introduced two intensive summer courses, a GCSE preparation programme and an A-level/International Baccalaureate preparation programme which both proved popular with students." ●

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