

High school access

Many independent schools (also called private or public schools) in the UK offer highly targeted English language programmes to prepare students for their high school studies in the UK. GILLIAN EVANS reports.

The UK has a long tradition of providing excellent private high school education and many independent schools have expanded their English language provision for overseas students by setting up separate international study centres. These enable overseas students to learn English as well as study other subjects while living with British students.

This development has been sparked by the realisation that specific tuition is invaluable for overseas students entering the mainstream education system in the UK, as Mike Hamlett of Rossall International Study Centre, explains. "There is an increasing awareness amongst boarding schools that overseas students need adequate preparation if [they] are to achieve success in the British system, especially as far as public exams are concerned."

Academic preparation programmes at independent schools are generally aimed at students aged up to 16 years, who are intending to continue their high school education in the UK. Running for up to one year, they combine intensive English language tuition with classes in other subjects. Peter Harris, Director of King's International Study Centre, explains, "great attention is paid to the language that is needed to comprehend [various subjects]". Most schools also offer students the whole range of English language exams, including IELTS, Toefl and the Cambridge exams.

Students can take the UK's public high school exams at 16, called GCSE, or the specific international variation, IGCSE. "We offer a one-year IGCSE programme in [a range of subjects] for those aged 15 to 16," explains Hamlett. "About 50 per cent of the students transfer to the main school. The one-year IGCSE programme serves as a foundation for those seeking to take [the international baccalaureate] in the main school."

Enrolment at an independent school's study centre does not guarantee entry into the mainstream school and many centres advise and help students with their applications to other schools too. Susan Harris at Taunton International Study Centre says, "About 20 per cent of [our] students go on to Taunton School but the other 80 per cent go on to a wide variety of schools in the UK."

At St Bede's, which has four different sites in the south of England, English language tuition for overseas students is provided while students take part in classes at the main school.

"St Bede's campuses have EFL departments where teachers concentrate on teaching EFL classes at various levels, and also provide EFL support during [homework] time," explains Nigel Heritage at the school. In the mainstream lessons, students do the subjects they can manage, which according to Heritage, is "usually all of them except modern languages, when they have extra EFL [classes]".

Taking an academic preparation course at an independent school also allows overseas students to experience life at a UK boarding school. "All our students wear a uniform, board in the school and adjust to a structural programme of lessons between 9am and 3.30pm," says Harris at Kings International Study Centre. Apart from during class time, all overseas students are integrated with British students. "Students dine with the King's School pupils, share the library, sports fields and IT facilities, and every effort is made to encourage students to participate in clubs and societies within the school," says Harris.

Independent schools often benefit from a wide range of high quality facilities on site, providing students with unique opportunities. Heritage says, "We are unusual at St Bede's [as we have] a dance school as part of the school, so students join us to study dance and continue their academic education."

The main student provider markets for UK independent schools are China, Taiwan, Russia and, to a lesser extent, Germany and France. "Usually our nationality breakdown is about 40 per cent European, 60 per cent Asian," says Hamlett, adding, "Germany is a big market for pre-international baccalaureate."



In terms of attracting students, independent schools say they rely heavily on overseas agents. "About 75 per cent of [our] students come through agents. The remaining 25 per cent book directly as a result of personal recommendation or the Internet," relates Harris. She adds, "It is very helpful if agents can visit the school to understand exactly what we offer, as we are in a very specialist niche market."

Heritage says that it can be difficult to find agents who have sufficient market knowledge of this sector. "Finding agents who are good at promoting the year-round school is more difficult than those who can promote the summer school because they need to be at ease knowing the UK education system," he says. "The first thing is to know the UK system and then their own country's system sufficiently well to advise parents of the comparisons."

Vacation courses

Given the high quality facilities and on-site residential accommodation of most independent schools, they are the ideal location for summer English courses. Some schools organise their own programmes, while others hire out their facilities to other English language teaching organisations.

The types of courses offered during the summer depend on the school, with most international study centres retaining their academic bias. For example, at the Taunton International Study Centre, "Summer courses include English plus other academic subjects," says Susan Harris. "Courses are residential and include a daily programme of sports plus a full leisure programme. We use all Taunton's excellent sports and recreation facilities."

Other organisations run traditional activity programmes. "The aim of the summer course [at Rannoch School in Scotland] is to provide fun, friendship and learning in a healthy natural environment," explains Christopher Etchells, Director of the English Country School, which uses the premises of Rannoch School to run an English plus activity programme for 13-to-17 year olds in summer.

Rannoch School is situated in spectacular mountain and forest scenery next to a lake in the Scottish Highlands. Etchells explains that the range of activities offered includes climbing, abseiling, rafting, gorge walking, canoeing, sailing and golf lessons with a qualified professional instructor.

Generally, independent schools have extremely high quality facilities. At St Bede's, summer course students benefit from its on-site golf course, riding stables, tennis courts and dance studio. In addition, students are supervised around the clock, and there is a high staff/student ratio of approximately 1:6.