

Foundations for onward study

Academic preparation and university foundation programmes are invaluable in helping students to adapt to studies in another country, but costs and visa problems are getting in the way of growth in this sector. GILLIAN EVANS reports.

For many international students, one of the main reasons for learning a language is for their further studies overseas. It therefore makes sense to take an academic preparation (AP) or university foundation (UF) programme to aid smooth transition into their chosen degree programme at an overseas institution. Such courses are, according to Janet Tripodi at Concorde International in Canterbury in the UK, designed "to give the student the preparation that is essential for overseas students entering higher education".

In countries with well established education export markets, such as the USA, Canada, the UK, Australia and New Zealand, there is a whole raft of highly tuned English language programmes that prepare students for further studies in the host country. However, there is a lot of variety within the AP and UF course sector. Some

courses such as that offered by Crest School of English in London, UK, include academic reading, listening, speaking, writing, research skills, time management and compiling oral presentations, as well as close counselling from individual tutors. Meanwhile, Harrogate Tutorial College in Harrogate in the UK offers GCSE and A-level courses to international students as either one- or two-year programmes. These are supplemented by academic English, study skills and IELTS preparation. "We believe the best route to university entrance is via A-level courses," asserts Keith Pollard, Principal, "so that students have the subject knowledge and vocabulary to cope with the degree courses."

students to take up to six credit hours (two courses) in addition to the English language tuition. Tesl Centre Director, Maureen Sargent, notes that although both courses are in high demand, "the UBP is becoming more popular with advanced-level students as it allows them to start undertaking credit courses while completing their English language studies".

Non-English market

In non-English-speaking countries with less of a tradition of education export, academic preparation provision for international students is at best patchy, although there have been improvements in recent years. The Institut d'Etudes Françaises (IEF), which is situated within the La Rochelle Business School in La Rochelle, France, organises a one-semester or one-year university preparation programme. Offered in collaboration with La Rochelle Business School and Imis-Esthua Angers University, the programme provides intensive French language tuition, preparation for the TEF examination (Test d'Evaluation du Français), which is required for entrance to French universities, study orientation and a subject-specific module, which students can choose according to their future area of study, for example, tourism, hospitality or management.

In Germany, academic preparation usually centres on exam preparation. Did Deutsch Institut in Germany offers long-term diploma courses of 24, 32 or 40 weeks that conclude in the TestDaF exam. At Kapito Sprachschule in Muenster, Germany, the university preparation course is more targeted. Although also centring on TestDaF preparation, Hansgerd Schomacher at the school, explains, "[Students] learn not only grammar and everyday communications, but also how to work with written texts, to produce written work on specific topics, and to understand longer and more complex



PHOTOGRAPH: INTERNATIONAL HOUSE NEWCASTLE

Earning credit

A trend in the English language AP/UF market has been towards courses that enable students to work towards their future university or college course. At the International Education Program at the University of California Riverside in the USA, for example, the 10-week English for academic purposes programme comprises vocabulary and critical reading, and academic skills including speaking and writing. In addition, students can take one campus class with American students, which, upon successful completion, translates into a fully transferable university credit.

The Tesl Centre at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, NS in Canada also offers students a way in which to earn university credits while on their preparation course. In addition to the eight-week English for academic purposes programme, the centre offers a 16-week university bridging programme (UBP), which allows

Cost-effective alternatives

With an eye on costs, international students are increasingly searching for ways of obtaining an international education at a lower price tag. Agent Margarita Galindo Moreno of Latino Australia Education in Colombia reports that in Colombia the school system finishes at what is year 11 in Australia, so any students wishing to go on to university there have to take a year-long foundation course for entrance. Because of this, says Galindo Moreno, Bachelor degrees in Australia are becoming less popular, and those who do go often bypass the foundation programme by studying for two semesters in their home country, which is accepted by some Australian universities.

In the UK, some UF courses enable students to skip the first year of university studies. Janet Tripodi at

Concorde International in the UK believes demand for these programmes will grow. "Opportunities to enter universities in the second year, after completion of the foundation diploma, are likely to increase demand for these courses, in preparation for an accelerated entry to the second year of the degree."

With escalating costs in some destinations, international students are widening their search for quality tertiary study locations. One such destination is South Africa. Although the international higher education market education is still in its infancy, academic preparation programmes are becoming increasingly popular. EC Cape Town offers an academic year programme, which, says Sue Camilleri at the school, usually starts with a period of general English, then goes onto Toefl or Ielts exam preparation, followed by some tuition in study skills.

According to Camilleri, they are planning to change the course for 2009 "due to growth in this market." She elaborates, "Course content will be revised to include more academic training in preparation for university and we will try and link AP courses in one school to acceptance in universities in a different country."

In terms of the main student nationalities, EC Cape Town's AP students generally come from other African countries such as Angola, Cameroon, Congo and Gabon. "These are the countries that know most about the South African education system," says Camilleri. More surprisingly, however, is the fact that Chinese feature among their top line up of nationalities too. "These clients seem hungry for tertiary education and it is often easier to be accepted [for entry] here rather than the US or UK where visas can be more difficult," asserts Camilleri.

listening texts and to take notes from them."

According to Schomacher, their university preparation course is most popular with Israeli and Korean students.

Asian axis

The student nationality line-up in AP and foundation courses in general is dominated by Asian students, particularly Chinese, Koreans and Malaysians although numbers from Eastern Europe and the Middle East are also growing. In the UK, Pollard reports high numbers from China and Russia and increasing enrolments from Eastern European countries. Sargent in Canada says that although Chinese students have topped their enrolments for AP and UF programmes for the last six years, they are welcoming more Saudi Arabian students.

Clearly, growth of the AP/UF sector is closely linked to trends in the international education market. One of the great selling points for German universities in the past has been that university education was free for all including international students. However, this has changed in recent years, with some laender (provinces) introducing tuition fees of up to €500 (US\$771) per semester. Although the tuition fees are considerably lower than those charged by universities in other countries, Patrick Semidei at Did believes that if more areas introduce the fees, it will have a considerable impact on the market.

In the UK, the situation, according to Tripodi, remains rosy. "As demand for UK university places grows, so will demand for our access and foundation programmes." However, she does concede that although they have "a healthy stream of enquiries from students", most of these do not develop into enrolments. She explains, "Sometimes this is due to the cost factor but more often than not with the difficulty in obtaining visas."

Fluctuating demand

At Geos Perth in Australia, students looking for a university foundation programme take their English for High School (EHP) preparation course, giving students the equivalent of Australia's high school year 12. However, Gary Maserow at the school reports that since the Asian economic crisis in 1997, their EHP student numbers have fallen. "Since then," he says, "Indonesia, which was a wonderful source of students, has steadily declined."

Cleve Brown, Director of Worldwide School of English in Auckland, New Zealand paints a similar picture of dwindling demand for AP programmes although he puts this down to costs. "AP is currently not a growth sector as the high New Zealand currency discourages long-term study, which many AP [courses] are."

Brown dubs the years from 2000 to 2003 as the "peak years" for New Zealand's EAP programmes, during which time Worldwide ran an intensive EAP programme that attracted mainly Chinese, Russians, Indonesians, Vietnamese and Koreans.

Motivational issues

Although Brown acknowledges the importance of AP/UF programmes, he says however that in his experience students themselves were often not motivated – raising an important issue

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that both schools and agencies should be aware of. "Despite the importance of [university study skills], students were often single-minded about their study goals. They simply wanted entry into university – [to get] the 'golden ticket'," says Brown. "For this reason they were more concerned with achieving the required Ielts score." High dropout rates for international students in the first year of university studies reflected this attitude, says Brown.

Sargent concurs, saying that most students do not realise the wide range of skills that they need to succeed in tertiary level study. "We find that some students have unrealistic expectations about how quickly it will take them to reach the proficiency level required to support success in credit courses. Therefore, some drift in and out of sessions, making it difficult to manage enrolment."

Clearly, as long as students are seeking education opportunities overseas, there is a need for AP and UF courses. However, convincing them of the value of such programmes is another matter.