

## Choosing your independent school

United Kingdom (UK) independent schools are known all over the world for their excellence. Academic success rates are high, and more than 90% of all independent school pupils go on to university, mainly in the UK. There is a huge choice of schools in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland and schools usually take pupils from ages five to eighteen. More than 500 of these schools take pupils who board and they may do this from the age of seven. After going through a UK independent school, a child will not only have benefited from one of the best educational experiences in the world, but will be a fluent speaker of English, which is becoming the global language of business and commerce.

### **Checklist: Why should I choose a boarding school or college in the United Kingdom?**

- They offer an excellent education in a stable and safe country.
- The UK independent school system develops high academic success, independence and social responsibility.
- You can expect the latest teaching methods in small classes, with excellent facilities, a wide choice of subjects and courses, and concern for your child's welfare.
- Sport and cultural activities are considered important to a broad education.
- Most UK boarding schools have long experience of catering for the needs of pupils from a range of nationalities.
- For children with special educational needs (SEN), the provision in schools accredited by the Independent schools Council is first rate. ISCis International can help with specific information on the types of SENs catered for by individual schools.



# 1 Choosing a school

## ***Where should I start looking?***

One of the best places is the Independent Schools Council (ISC) which has a searchable database of its member schools on its website [www.isc.co.uk](http://www.isc.co.uk). Only schools which are fully accredited and regularly inspected by the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) appear on this site. Parents can also look at the ISCis International website ([www.iscisinternational.co.uk](http://www.iscisinternational.co.uk)) or contact the ISCis International consultants in London on +44 207 798 1550.

Other sites that are of use are:

Education UK ([www.educationuk.org](http://www.educationuk.org) – select ‘School search’)

Independent Schools of the British Isles ([www.isbi.com](http://www.isbi.com) )

Hobsons ([www.boardingschools.hobsons.com](http://www.boardingschools.hobsons.com))

The British Accreditation Council (BAC) ([www.thecapability.uk.com/bac](http://www.thecapability.uk.com/bac)) keeps a searchable database of independent tutorial colleges.

The Council for Independent Further Education (CIFE) provides links to its member colleges from its website. ([www.getthegrade.co.uk](http://www.getthegrade.co.uk))

## **State maintained boarding schools**

There are thirty-two state maintained boarding schools in the UK. Only EU nationals and those with the right of residence in the UK are eligible for places at these schools. Tuition is free but there is a charge for the boarding element. For more information contact the State Boarding Schools’ Association at [www.sbsa.org.uk](http://www.sbsa.org.uk)

## ***What is the difference between an independent school and an independent tutorial college?***

Independent schools cover the full school age range, whether primary or secondary (or, in some cases, both) and concentrate on the general education of pupils up to the age of eighteen. Tutorial colleges are usually for those aged sixteen and above. They offer a wide range of courses in small classes, including career-based courses and access courses. They also run one year courses to re-sit A-levels (which usually take two years).

## ***Can an independent school encourage my child’s sporting excellence?***

Independent schools take sport seriously, offer a wide range of sporting activities and often have outstanding facilities. Many of the UK’s outstanding international sports stars learned their skills first at a boarding school. Several schools offer scholarships or bursaries to talented sports people. You can search the ISCis database for these.

## ***What qualifications are offered?***

Independent schools do not have to follow a compulsory national curriculum or guidelines, but most of the courses work towards standard public examinations. This ensures that qualifications are consistent and recognised. These are usually General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSEs) for pupils aged sixteen (Scottish Certificate of Education Standard Grades in Scotland), and A-levels for pupils aged seventeen (Scottish Highers and Advanced Highers in Scotland). Some Scottish independent schools also offer GCSEs and A-levels as an alternative or exclusively. The International Baccalaureate is offered at an increasing number of independent schools. Some also offer vocational A- and AS-levels. Tutorial colleges also offer foundation courses and one year courses to re-take A-levels.



## 2 Entrance

### ***Is it difficult to get in?***

This varies. The most popular schools always have more applicants than places and can require a high academic standard. But there are many UK schools which accept pupils of varying abilities and pride themselves on getting the best out of students, whatever their abilities. There may be academic entrance tests. Most UK pupils sit a special examination, the Common Entrance exam, at the age of eleven or thirteen. This may be difficult for children who have been through a different educational system, so international students are usually tested, instead, on mathematics and English language.

### ***When is the best time to start?***

Preferably at the beginning of the academic year (in September) or at the start of a public examination course. However, whenever a new pupil arrives, independent schools will ensure that they are integrated into both the academic programme and school life as quickly as possible. Many overseas pupils will come, initially to a Summer School or to spend a short period of, say, a month or a term in one of the increasing number of UK private schools which welcome them at certain periods of the year to do this. Once pupils have familiarised themselves with the school environment they often choose to stay and continue their studies in the UK.

### ***Will my child be able to move on to a United Kingdom university?***

Yes, as long as he or she applies in the normal way and achieves the exam grades asked for by the university. UK universities now charge tuition fees for everyone, including UK and European Union (EU) students (but EU students pay a lower, subsidised rate). For more information, refer to *Choosing your degree course and institution* and *Tuition fees and financial help for EU students* in this series.

## 3 Quality assurance

### ***Are independent schools and tutorial colleges regulated to assure their standards?***

Yes. All independent schools have to be registered with the government education departments in England and Wales, or Scotland or Northern Ireland. Education departments lay down minimum standards of facilities and teaching and can enforce them. All independent schools are inspected both for their education standards and the standards of care and welfare of their pupils. There is also a voluntary accreditation scheme run by the Independent Schools Council, which carries out inspections; their inspection reports can be read on the ISI web site ([www.isinspect.org.uk](http://www.isinspect.org.uk)).

Tutorial colleges are not inspected by the government. They can choose to join the Council for Independent Further and Higher Education (CIFE). CIFE colleges are inspected and accredited by the British Accreditation Council for Independent Further and Higher Education (BAC).

### ***Where can I find school examination results?***

To look at academic results, and other indicators of a school's performance see the following websites:

BBC [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/league\\_tables/default.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/league_tables/default.stm).

DfES [www.dfes.gov.uk/performance/tables/](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/performance/tables/)

Parentzone Scotland [www.parentzonescotland.gov.uk/choosingaschool/schoolinformation.asp](http://www.parentzonescotland.gov.uk/choosingaschool/schoolinformation.asp)



### ***Will a more expensive school be better?***

Not necessarily. Some UK independent schools are well known throughout the world, and they may be among the more expensive. Other schools receive endowments, which effectively subsidise tuition fees. But don't assume that a school which is high in performance tables is necessarily the best. Many schools with more modest league table positions will be doing an outstanding job for pupils of all abilities. And in any case, examination performance is not everything. UK schools pride themselves on providing an excellent all-round education.

#### **Checklist: Choosing your boarding school or college**

- Check what is included in the institution fees. Usually, fees include: tuition, medical care, accommodation, meals, stationery, textbooks and sport and recreation facilities. They do not usually include: uniforms, sports clothes, telephone calls or travel home.
- Make sure you apply well in advance. To begin a new academic year, usually in September, you should apply a year before the start date.
- If you think your child could get a scholarship (help towards fees), you should also arrange for them to take the exam, which is competitive, well in advance. This could be nearly a year before the start date.
- All schools have different attitudes and cultures. You should look through their prospectuses and web sites thoroughly to find which school offers the features you want. Prospectuses will also show which schools specialise in sport or other areas.
- Ensure that there are enough boarders at your chosen school to make sure your child will have company at weekends and half-term holidays.
- Some schools offer special programmes in English as a Second Language (ESOL). All tutorial colleges offer English language support along with the main subject.
- Has the school been accredited by the Independent Schools Council? If not, what guarantees can it provide of the quality of its education? Look at examination results but bear in mind that this should only be one factor in your decision.

## **4 Welfare**

### ***Are there any legal matters governing children at boarding school?***

Yes. All children under the age of sixteen should have a guardian. This should be someone resident in the UK who can care for them if they are suddenly ill, or during vacations if they cannot go home. Some schools may insist that a guardian is appointed and others will not. However, in Scotland, this is a requirement in all schools. More information on guardianship can be obtained from ISCis International. ([www.iscisinternational.co.uk](http://www.iscisinternational.co.uk))

### ***Will my child enjoy a safe and happy environment?***

Schools go out of their way to ensure that boarding students really enjoy their experience and see their schooldays in the UK as fun. Recent surveys of UK boarding students show that the majority of them choose boarding for themselves and find it a happy and fulfilling experience, giving them opportunities they would not otherwise have enjoyed and making lifelong friendships. Schools and colleges pay great attention to their pupils' welfare and try to provide friendly, individual attention and a sense of family.



## 5 Next steps

### Checklist: Your next steps

- 1 Begin your search for a suitable school or tutorial college well in advance – well over a year before your son or daughter is to start. Websites are a good starting point (ISCis International, ISBI, SCIS, CIFE) and the schools' own websites should enable you to look for any special requirements you want.
- 2 There are several methods of application. You can contact the school or tutorial college direct to ask for a prospectus or registration form. Applications can be submitted by the British Council in some countries. ISCis International offers impartial help and advice to parents as well as an alternative application process and can help with finding suitable schools.
- 3 Fill in and return the registration or application form along with any other documents you are asked for. These could be a school report, the result of an English test or a reference.
- 4 The school or college will want to assess the pupil, either through examination or by referring to his or her academic record and contacting his or her current head teacher. Some schools have more formal procedures and examinations than others. The results of exams are given immediately.
- 5 The school or college usually asks for a report from the pupil's current school. They may also want to interview parents (though they accept that this is not always possible with international students).
- 6 If the child has not had to take an exam, the school is likely to prefer an interview, if possible. If it is not possible, a school or college will usually accept a pupil (or not) within forty-eight hours of seeing the application form.

## 6 What else do I need to know?

You should bear in mind immigration requirements when considering whether to study in the UK. Requirements vary according to your nationality or citizenship and the length of time you want to spend studying. You will not be allowed to extend your permission to stay in the UK for more than two years on courses that are below degree level and are of less than one year's duration. The UKCOSA website will give you further information on this topic – [www.ukcosa.org.uk/pages/guidenote.htm](http://www.ukcosa.org.uk/pages/guidenote.htm)

Note in particular that you will not be given permission to enter the UK as a student if the school, college or university that you want to study at does not appear on the UK Department for Education and Skills Register of Education and Training Providers. You can check the register by clicking on 'Browse the Register' at [www.dfes.gov.uk/providersregister/](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/providersregister/)

For practical advice on living in the UK download *Studying and living in the UK* from [www.educationuk.org/bc\\_img/body/articles/pdfs/stud\\_live\\_uk.pdf](http://www.educationuk.org/bc_img/body/articles/pdfs/stud_live_uk.pdf)



## 7 Where can I find more information?

### British Council Education information

Website [www.educationuk.org](http://www.educationuk.org)

For further information, you can find details of your nearest office at [www.britishcouncil.org/home-contact-worldwide.htm](http://www.britishcouncil.org/home-contact-worldwide.htm) which includes links to all our country web pages and a worldwide address book giving contact details for all offices.

### Boarding Schools' Association (BSA)

Grosvenor Gardens House  
35-37 Grosvenor Gardens  
London SW1W 0BS

Telephone +44 (0) 7798 1580  
Fax +44 (0) 7798 1581  
Email [bsa@boarding.org.uk](mailto:bsa@boarding.org.uk)  
Website [www.boarding.org.uk](http://www.boarding.org.uk)

### State Boarding Schools' Association (SBSA)

Website [www.sbsa.org.uk](http://www.sbsa.org.uk)

### British Accreditation Council for Independent Further and Higher Education (BAC)

44 Bedford Row  
London WC1R 4LL

Telephone +44 (0) 20 7447 2584  
Fax +44 (0) 20 7447 2585  
Email [info@the-bac.org](mailto:info@the-bac.org)  
Website [www.thecapability.uk.com/bac](http://www.thecapability.uk.com/bac)

### The Council for Independent Further Education (CIFE)

Executive Secretary  
Dr Norma Ball  
75 Foxbourne Road  
London SW17 8EN

Telephone +44 (0) 20 8767 8666  
Website [www.getthegrade.co.uk](http://www.getthegrade.co.uk)

### Independent Schools Examinations Board (ISEB)

Jordan House  
Christchurch Road  
New Milton  
Hampshire BH25 6QJ  
Telephone +44 (0) 14 2562 1111  
Fax +44 (0) 14 2562 0044  
Email [ce@iseb.co.uk](mailto:ce@iseb.co.uk)  
Website [www.iseb.co.uk](http://www.iseb.co.uk)

### Independent Schools Council

Website [www.isc.co.uk](http://www.isc.co.uk)

### ISCis International

Grosvenor Gardens House  
35-37 Grosvenor Gardens  
London SW1W 0BS

Telephone +44 (0) 207 798 1550  
Fax +44 (0) 207 798 1551  
Email [international@iscisinternational.co.uk](mailto:international@iscisinternational.co.uk)  
Website [www.iscisinternational.co.uk](http://www.iscisinternational.co.uk)

### Scottish Council of Independent Schools (SCIS)

21 Melville Street  
Edinburgh EH3 7PE

Telephone +44 (0) 131 220 2106  
Fax +44 (0) 131 225 8594  
Email [information@scis.org.uk](mailto:information@scis.org.uk)  
Website [www.scis.org.uk](http://www.scis.org.uk)

### Other useful resources

*Which School? 2005?* 79th edition (John Catt 2003, ISBN 0 9015 7788 X) - lists over 2000 schools and colleges in Great Britain including schools offering the International Baccalaureate, plus: Independent Day and Boarding Schools in Great Britain, Roman Catholic Schools in Europe, Institutes of Further Education.

*While every effort has been made to ensure that the information given here is correct and up to date, the British Council accepts no legal liability for its accuracy, currency or completeness.*

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