



BRITISH INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL RIYADH

Choosing a School

Some Key Issues

General decisions to make

You can narrow down the initial choice of schools simply by making a few early decisions on the following:

Co-education or single sex?

Many schools in the UK cater either only for boys or just for girls. Arguments abound for and against single-sex education, but the decision should be yours and your child's. Would he/she thrive in a school without the distraction of the opposite sex? Or do you feel that, since life is co-educational, school should mirror that? Only you can decide which option would be the most suitable. Whatever your feelings on the issue, be sure to discuss the options with your child.

How many students are full boarders?

Most international students are full boarders, which means that they stay at school most weekends and enjoy a weekend programme of study, outings and activities and entertainment. It is important to check with the school how many of their students are full boarders and how many are weekly boarders (who stay at the school during the week and go home at weekends). A school with a full boarding house at weekends may mean a wider activities programme than a school with few weekend students.

At what age should my child start boarding?

You should also think about the age at which you would like your child to start boarding. Children may board in a UK preparatory school (often known as prep school) from the age of 7 and 8, although some may, under special circumstances, accept younger children. Prep schools are usually quite small and very family-orientated with bright, cosy shared bedrooms, and lots of games and fun activities at weekends and in the evenings. At the age of 11 or 13 (or, in some cases, 12), students will transfer to a senior school where they may stay until the age of 18. Senior schools are generally larger and expect more self-discipline from the students.

In the UK, the cut-off date that determines a child's school age is 1st September. Independent schools do not have to stick rigidly to this system, but, on the whole, they prefer to, as all kinds of school data are based on this date divide.

How much will it cost?

It is also useful to have a good idea of your financial strength before you start your search. You should try to have a limit and then try to stick to it. If you feel it necessary, seek financial advice that will enable you to make long-term plans for your child's education.

Specific factors

There is a boarding school in the UK to suit every child, so choose carefully to ensure that your child enters one that best suits their academic abilities, talents, support needs, personality, hopes and dreams. The best school for a child is not necessarily the most academic! Children learn better in an environment where they are happy and can grow in confidence, and schools with demanding academic programmes will not be suitable for all. Once you have found several schools that meet your broad requirements, there are a number of other factors that will help you draw up a shortlist.

Environment – town or country?

There are good boarding schools in both towns and country areas. Many combine the beauty of historical buildings with excellent modern teaching facilities. Good road and rail links mean that transport to and from UK airports and railway stations is never problematic. Schools will arrange transport to correspond with flight times so your child is looked after from the moment they arrive in the UK until they leave for home.

What if my child has particular talents or strengths?

All boarding schools offer a wide variety of extra-curricular activities and sport to keep boarders busy and happy. But just as traditions and ethos vary from school to school, some schools also have particular strengths. Some will specialise in a particular area, such as sport, music, or performing arts. If your child has a special interest or talent, you may like to choose a school that has the best facilities and experience to nurture this talent. Some may even offer scholarships (a fees reduction for excellence) in a particular area.

Will my child be looked after well?

UK boarding schools offer high levels of care and security, which are very attractive to parent living overseas. As well as the pastoral care afforded by the staff looking after boarders on a daily basis, most good boarding schools belong to the Independent Schools Council (ISC) and the Boarding Schools' Association (BSA). These member schools are subject to an inspection every six years by the Independent Schools' Inspectorate (ISI), which examines not only academic standards and teaching, but also the quality of learning, the behaviour of students, the boarding provision, the curricular and extra-curricular activities, premises, and resources and many other factors. A detailed inspection of the boarding provision is also carried out every three years by the UK Government's Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted).

What if my child needs help with English?

Schools in membership of the ISC provide extra lessons for non-native speakers of English. The number and frequency of these lessons will be decided upon when your child arrives in school. You can be sure therefore that your child will receive an appropriate level of English language support from expert, specialist staff to ensure that they are able to take a full part in all areas of school life, work, and play. Some boarding schools have international study centres for students from overseas, which prepare them for studying within the British education system. These centres offer teaching in small classes and all subjects and their staff are trained in teaching English as a foreign language.

Do I agree with the ethos and traditions of the school?

Ethos and traditions of schools vary enormously. In some, children may call staff by their first names, wear no school uniform, plan their own curriculum, and opt out of team or acts of worship. In others, tradition dictates that students are called by surnames, stiff collars are worn for formal occasions, everyone learns Latin, and representing the school team or membership of the chapel choir is the most important personal achievement outside the academic curriculum.

Starting age and selection

Selection is a two-way process, in that schools have just as much interest in selecting the student as the family has in selecting the school. However, it is wise to apply to your chosen school as early as possible since some may have waiting lists.

Preparatory school entry

Many parents choose Year 5 (age 9+) as the best age to start prep school boarding. This is often when students begin to be grouped by ability. Entry at 9+ will also give your child an opportunity to get used to different study habits before either the Key Stage 2 National Curriculum Tests (which are also known as SATS) at the end of Year 6 (age 10+), or the Common Entrance exams at 11 or 13 for those moving on to a senior school.

Senior school entry

Year 7 (age 11+) or Year 9 (age 13+) are the usual entry points, although places may sometimes be available in Year 8 (age 12+) and Year 10 (age 14+). Year 10 is a vital point in most schools, as two-year GCSE courses (or Standard Grade courses at some Scottish independent schools) start at the beginning of this year and usually involve some kind of continuous assessment.

Most schools do not accept Year 11 (age 15+) students, unless they are moving from a compatible GCSE programme elsewhere, since the curriculum and examination boards rarely match from school to school. Students could join either a Year 10 class with 14-year-olds to follow a two-year course to GCSE or, in some schools, a special one-year foundation class for international students, where they will be prepared, as much as possible, for a place on an A-level course.

Secondary schooling in Scottish state schools starts at age 12+ (S1 in the Scottish year numbering system), rather than 11 or 13. Some Scottish independent senior schools follow this system and accept students from the age of 12, while others follow the English system.

Sixth-form entry

Years 12 and 13 (ages 16+ and 17+) are usually for those who have qualified for AS- and A-level entry. (In Scottish state schools, students in S5 and S6 (ages 16+ and 17+) take Highers and Advanced Highers, and some Scottish independent schools offer these exams.)

Some schools will offer a one-year foundation course that will prepare students from outside the UK for a two-year A-level course, or allow them to gain the necessary sixth-form entry qualifications. Some schools offer an International Baccalaureate programme as an alternative to A-level, while some offer both.

What happens next?

Once you have considered the points in this article, you are ready to draw up a shortlist of schools that meet your requirements. Use the in-depth school profiles in this Guide (and school websites) to find out more about ISC-member boarding schools and then telephone, write to or email those schools you are interested in. You should include details of your child's name, age, date of birth, nationality, religion, and desired starting date. You should also mention the schools attended by your child, with dates, details of any public examination passed and a copy of his/her latest report. It helps too to mention the child's special talents or interests. The school will then send you a prospectus or video/DVD, which will give you a flavour of the school.

The new school year typically starts in September so it is preferable for new students to arrive then. However, schools with places will often accept students in non-examination years at other times during the academic year. Schools are more willing to do this for younger students than older students. The year is divided into three terms – September to December; early January to late March; and late April to early/mid July.

If you are able to come to the UK to visit the school, you may arrange a personal appointment to see the Head or you can attend an open day.

Personal appointments

It is the Head who determines the whole ethos of a school, but the day-to-day responsibility for boarding lies with the housemaster/mistress. These are the people who look after the needs of the boarding students. During your visit you should meet both the Head and the Housemaster/mistress and may be given a tour by students. This will give you a chance to ask questions about daily life at the school and get a feel for the school.

Open days

The advantage of visiting on an open day is that you can meet teachers and students, ask more questions and explore the school's facilities in more detail and get a better feel for the place. The disadvantage is that you will certainly not be seeing the school on a normal, working day.

Enjoy the search!