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## BRITISH INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL RIYADH

# Visiting a School

## Some Questions to Ask

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If you are able to travel to the UK to visit schools on your shortlist, you should have the opportunity to spend time with the Head, a boarding housemate/ mistress and a student. Be prepared to ask questions of each of them on the key aspects of the school and how these could affect your child.

The following is a list of questions to consider asking, particularly if you found the school's website, prospectus, and accompanying information did not cover everything you wanted to know. The list is not exhaustive; use it as a guide and adapt the questions to your own requirements – you will have to be selective, given the relatively short time available.

### **Academic issues**

#### **What are the entry requirements? Is our child likely to obtain a place and when?**

This is a crucial initial administrative matter to sort out. Remember that the majority of places available will be for the main ages of entry – normally at 7, 8, and 11 for a prep school, and at 11, 13, and 16 for a senior school. You need to know whether to have alternative schools lined up, and at what age the school recommends entry. You should also find out what arrangements need to be made to take any entrance exams or tests.

#### **What are the school's plans for the 14-19 Curriculum?**

The debate on the nature of the 14-19 Curriculum is ongoing, and most parents should be able to feel confident and reassured that the school has realistic plans for the future. Larger schools will be able to offer both A-levels and the International Baccalaureate, but the smaller ones will find it more difficult and expensive. Additionally, from September 2008, schools have been able to offer the Cambridge Pre-University Diploma (known as the 'Pre-U'). Most schools, though, will be attempting to broaden their sixth-form curriculum and introduce the more skill-based courses. There should be an awareness and concern about the range of issues now involved.

#### **Can we see your academic results for the past three years? Also, can we see details of the school's position in the league tables and the number of places obtained by students at UK universities?**

There is now much talk about 'value added', but measuring it or benchmarking it is difficult. Average points score per subject and per student have become important indicators. League tables need to be treated with caution though, as they do not give a rounded picture of the school's real success or failure at enabling students to reach their full potential. However, the annual tables or, better still, the averages over the past three years can be used to identify trends within a school, and most schools accept that these tables are used for obtaining comparisons. The tables should make information available in a form that is understandable and helpful to parents. These, and the places obtained at UK universities, will give you an indication of student's attainment and progress, particularly with reference to the top of the ability range, and of the school's success at helping students realize their academic potential.

**How does the school approach the teaching of English, sciences, mathematics, modern languages, and information and communication technology (ICT) for the most and least able students?**

These are key subjects, and your child could be at either end of the ability range. It is important to know how a school responds to a child's individual range. It is also important to find out how subjects fit into a broad, well-balanced curriculum, and how essential study skills, particularly in ICT, are being developed and integrated.

**How will the school get the best out of our child, who has a particular interest in sport/music/drama/art...?**

This is a very general question aimed at finding out what the school's extracurricular activities are, and how the school encourages participation in them. Ask about the activities that interest your child most or in what he/she has a particular talent.

**What is the school's policy on careers education and application to further and higher education? Does the school have particularly strong links to any professions?**

Good careers advice is an essential part of education throughout the school. Providing advice and help to students so that they can take the right steps into the outside world and its many career opportunities is a crucial role for the school. Career departments should have an established local support network of contacts in the main professions who are able and willing to pass on the benefits of their experience. Recent school-leavers' lists of university places and courses studied will provide a valuable indicator of the school's strength and successes.

## **Rules and regulations**

**What is your policy on use of the internet and mobile phones?**

Internet abuse is a major international problem, and parents should feel confident that the school has realistic, sensible, and positive policies in place to ensure students use the Net for educational purposes and to communicate with friends and family, but not to spend time playing computer games or downloading dubious material. Similarly, mobile phones have a constructive use, not least as a means of keeping in touch with parents, so long as rules on their use and security are in place and put into practice.

**What are the school's policies on alcohol, drugs, and smoking? Is the school facing any particular problems in any of these areas at present?**

Every school will have a policy in place to cover these matters. The real issue is how such matters are dealt with and whether the individuals concerned learn from their mistakes. This is a chance for prospective parents to consider the school's personal, social, and health education programme (PSHE), and its disciplinary policies; to see what medical and counseling services are available; to discover what happens if serious offences are committed; and to find out on what grounds a student may be expelled or suspended and when this last happened. You should feel that matters would be dealt with consistently, sympathetically, but firmly, and, above all, fairly.

**What are the key rules for boarders over the weekend, and how do these rules relate to what day students are allowed to do by their parents?**

This is a question for either head or the house staff. It is aimed at finding out as much as possible about what boarders can do at weekends and the school's ability to offer a variety of recreational, cultural, and social opportunities for all students.

## **Boarding life and pastoral care**

**Who is the first staff member our child should see if there is a problem? Whom can we contact if we are worried about our child's progress, behaviour, or performance or the quality of teaching that they are receiving?**

The right member of staff can deal with many problems immediately. Knowing who that person is and, above all, developing your confidence in them is very important. Most boarding schools have very good pastoral care and counselling systems, and knowing how these operate is very important. These questions will also allow you to find out how well the school communicates with parents, and what opportunities there are for visits to the school to meet teachers and other parents.

**How good is the catering? Do the students have an input into the choice of menu offered?**

These are questions you should ask the student showing you around the school. The general standard of school catering nowadays is remarkably high, with a strong emphasis on balanced, healthy diets. You might like to ask about what kinds of meals are typically available, or if the school is able to cater for any special dietary requirements your child may have.

**What medical arrangements does the school have in place?**

Obviously, it is important to know what happens in the case of either illness, or an emergency or accident, who the school medical staff are and what the facilities include.

**How important is the role of chapel in the life of the school?**

The chapel will play an important role in the school life. Whilst not every student will necessarily be expected to participate in the religious services, a great deal can be achieved through the more general assemblies which can also take place in chapel. These play an important part in personal, social, moral, and cultural education, and particularly in helping to develop the students' life skills and a sense of care, concern, and respect for others. Find out what the school's policy is on attendance.

## **Financial issues**

**Why have your fees increased above the rate of inflation this year? Why are the fees higher/lower than...? What are your salary scales for teaching staff and how do they compare with salaries in the maintained sector? What extras can I expect to pay?**

Overall education costs have risen considerably recently, mainly because of increased employers' contribution to teachers' pensions and increases in National Insurance. Potential parents should obtain the school's explanation. Well over two-thirds of school fees go on staff salaries, and the advent of performance-related pay in teaching means that independent schools will need to ensure their salary scales match those on the maintained sector. Also, annual increments will almost certainly ensure fee increases in line with, if not slightly above, inflation. Extras vary according to your child's extracurricular involvement and stage of education. But heads and the prospectus should explain, right at the outset, any additional expenses or financial developments.

## **Enjoy yourself!**

Above all, set out to enjoy your visit. You will find the vast majority of our boarding schools make an excellent impression, and their students and staff will be happy to share their enthusiasm for boarding.

## **After your visit**

After your visit, try to discuss with your child your thoughts about the people you met, what you were told and what you saw. Then ask yourself and your child a number of follow-up questions:

- What views did you form of the head? Why?
- What sort of leadership was provided?
- How did the aims and objectives of the school appear in practice?
- Was there a good rapport between students and staff?
- Were the students well mannered and enthusiastic about the school?
- Were the rules there to make it more civilized and caring community?
- Were the staff communicative and did they enjoy their teaching? Did they have control of their classes? What contribution did they make to the life of the school outside the classroom?
- Were the buildings well maintained and the grounds neat and attractive?
- Was there a generally positive atmosphere about the community?
- What did your child make of it all, and does the school meet your child's needs and abilities?