

eGuide

HOW TO CHOOSE AN INDEPENDENT SIXTH FORM COLLEGE



From
www.sixth-form.com and www.best-schools.co.uk

© Education Advisers Ltd 2009



What is an Independent Sixth Form College?

Most independent senior schools will have a Sixth Form which may offer any of the following examinations or, in the case of AS and A2, combinations of subjects.

- Advanced Subsidiary GCE (AS)
- Advanced GCE (A2) – The A Level
- National Qualifications in Scotland
- Vocational A Levels
- The International Baccalaureate
- GCSE

All of these examinations are valid qualifications and can be used as a means of entry to Universities or Further Education Colleges. These days, most students take 4 AS levels in the Lower 6th and continue with 3 subjects at A2, giving them 3 A levels and one AS at the end of their sixth form studies. Independent Sixth Form Colleges are a very real alternative to the standard school sixth form and because they do not have to cater for an extended age range they can offer more, both academically and socially, to the students who attend them.

Independent Sixth Form Colleges have a number of common characteristics. It is true that they are less formal but academically they are just as rigorous as any school and there is special attention paid to study skills which covers such topics as examination technique, essay-writing and note-taking – everything in fact that is needed to ensure that students are fully prepared for the demands of the examination system. There is a wide range of subjects available and as timetable constraints are not as rigid as in a school catering for a much greater age range, subjects can usually be combined to suit the suit individual student needs and requests. Class sizes are small enabling students to receive plenty of personal attention. Most colleges have good library facilities and also well equipped science laboratories.

Socially these colleges have a mixture of day and residential students and they can vary in size from about 50 to 400 students. To ensure that quality is maintained there are usually regular inspections by bodies such as the Independent Schools Council (ISC) the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the British Accreditation Council (BAC). Many of these colleges also offer sports facilities and have a programme of extra-curricular activities. However, you should appreciate that private sixth form colleges based in City centres rarely have the kind of sports or performing arts facilities often taken for granted in independent schools. Pastoral welfare is not forgotten and many colleges have a well organized system of personal tutors who monitor the academic progress of the students in their care on a regular basis.

To make sure that you select the college that is right for you there are a number of questions you should ask. The sixth form years are particularly important and there are obvious advantages with staying on into the sixth form of the present school, not least because of continuing with friends and teaching staff. However, for some of the reasons already stated regarding subject choice and change of scene, as well as a different style and method of education, it might be decided to change schools after GCSE exams. If this is the case then the following points should be considered.

1. Location and Accommodation

One of the first decisions to make is where to attend college and whether or not the student will live at home, commute or need rented accommodation. In the case of the first two options the decision-making can be quite straightforward and you will be looking within a certain distance of your house. However, UK private colleges only number 60 and are mostly based in London, Cambridge, Oxford and Birmingham. There are none north of Yorkshire!! Thus, if the college is some distance away, it may have accommodation of its own (either on site or off site), or will certainly be willing to help find accommodation in a local hostel or with a family. This does give the option of variety and price flexibility. Parents need to be sure that there is adequate supervision for under 18s.

The majority of independent 6F Colleges are centrally based in major cities. As a generalisation, City based colleges are not going to have such a wide range of school facilities such as swimming pools, sports facilities and Arts / Drama centres. They will usually make up for this by facilities arranged with external bodies in the City.

2. Curriculum

A major consideration is “does the college offer the required courses?” As a rule – the smaller the college, the smaller the range of A level courses. Most colleges are going to offer basic courses – English, mathematics, history etc. - usually totaling in the region of 20 to 24 courses – but the larger colleges may offer 40 or more, often including a range of vocational courses – which relate to specific careers. The International Baccalaureate is limited in its availability - see

<http://www.baccalaureate.eu.com>

It is important to choose a college that offers the subject range that you require. Whether it is to take a two year A-level programme, or a one year intensive course, or even one term resits, it is vital that the syllabuses offered are the right ones for you. Some sixth-form colleges specialise in particular subject areas, such as the sciences or the social sciences and all of them publish their available courses on their websites. If you are thinking of retaking an A-level then find out the exam board that the college is offering, as there could be a problem if it is different, e.g. you may find that the English Literature syllabus has different set books from the ones you have been studying. However, most colleges are very flexible in their academic organisation and because they have small numbers they can usually provide tuition, if need be on a one-to-one basis.

A lot of the international colleges concentrate on those courses in demand from Asia – typically – Maths, English, Sciences, Law, Business Studies. In these cases they often will not cater for subjects like Art or Theatre Studies or Media Studies. Also they often do not offer modern languages. There are still exceptional colleges for performing arts or languages or arts/textiles. Just contact us for free advice if this is what you seek.

Of course, many students want to go to a private college to prepare themselves for entry to a University medical school. Almost every college says that they “specialise in med-school grooming”, but that’s a slight exaggeration because some have significantly better track records than others. Just ask us for free unbiased advice.

The majority of students attend Sixth Form College to obtain A Levels to qualify them for University degree courses and thus the choice of portfolio of subjects is important to suit the degree and/or career choice. It is not the purpose of this website to advise students on A level subject choices, but they can obtain a report on this subject by applying to our company Education Advisers, using the email address les.webb@educationadvisers.co.uk

An increasing number of colleges are starting to offer GCSE courses either over 1 year or 2 years. Some colleges are even reducing entry ages down to 12 so that they compete with the school market. It is fair to say that currently their GCSE results do not rival independent schools, mostly because they are taking on students who have struggled with GCSEs already. However they often achieve remarkable transformations turning Ds and Es into As and Bs.

3. Examination Results:

You should look at academic success record. Most colleges will have posted these on their website and you can further find out individual subject results by simply asking them. The exam track-record will tell you a good deal about the college and whether or not it is the right one for you. There is always controversy about league tables because some schools are very selective on entry, thereby ensuring their A level results are invariably top rated. Many of such schools will have A level pass rates exceeding 95% and indeed some schools achieve more than 65% A and B grades. This is obviously the kind of track record which is excellent, especially as entry to elite Universities (e.g. the Russell Group) will usually demand A or B grades. However, before selecting a college on this basis, it should be considered whether or not the student will thrive in a high pressure academic environment. A lot of colleges are not selective in their intake, but this does not make them bad colleges, because they often improve the grades of students by two levels.

Our website is unique in being the only one to carry a league table of sixth form college A level results. On our best-schools.co.uk website we expect to get 100% of A level results from schools, but we only get 50% from the 60 colleges on sixth-form.com . Some might speculate that many colleges who refuse to publish their grades are unlikely to be in the top two quartiles.

4. Teaching Experience:

It is also important to find out the qualifications and experience of the staff and whether or not there is a high turnover of the teachers. The same rules apply in selecting any school – ask questions and meet the College Principal and tutors.

5. International Mix of Students

You should be aware that some colleges are 90% + international admissions and if so your child needs to be comfortable in such a multi-cultural environment, where sometimes 100% of students are boarders. Such colleges invariably offer “English Language Tuition as a Foreign Language” to bring language fluency up to UK university entry standards for those who need it. If you prefer a college with a balanced mix of UK Nationals with Foreign students or day with boarding, then use our consultancy service which is usually free.

6. College Amenities

The amenities available at college need researching before making a final decision. Classrooms, laboratories, art studios, careers advice, library provision and computer facilities should all be investigated as well as extra-curricular areas such as sport and also the standard of catering. Although the sixth-form colleges exist primarily for academic purposes, the social and sporting side of life should not be neglected.

7. Size

Sixth form colleges in the state sector now often run into the 1,000 to 3,000 size. In the independent sector it is more likely to be between 100 to 400. A larger size usually means a greater range of subjects and often a choice of vocational courses. However, what you are paying for in the private sector is individual attention and class sizes would typically be 7 to 12 students. There are some tutorial colleges which specialize in 1:1 tuition with a personal tutor. For this you will end up paying an hourly rate.

8. Study Hours and Timing

How many hours will be spent in study each week? It should be at least 6 hours of course tuition per subject per week. Over what period will study take place and when does it start? A levels are usually taken over 2 years (including the intermediate AS) but some colleges will offer to cram it into one year. Some colleges offer the flexibility of starting in January, April or September.

9. Rules & Discipline

Although teenagers like to imagine that they are perfectly capable of running their own lives they still require a framework of rules by which to lead their lives and it is important that sixth-form colleges have a clear framework of principles within which they operate. Some colleges have personal tutors who not only monitor academic progress but also act as mentors, in the true sense of the word, to the students under their care. Although they are more flexible in their approach, the sixth-form colleges have a very clear approach to discipline and without it being onerous they expect students to live and work within its limits. You should check with the college/s you are considering to find out their code of conduct.

10. International Students

Many international students come to UK 6th Form Colleges in order to gain entry to a UK University. Often the college will combine the A level courses with English Language tuition for the IELTS examination of the British Council or sometimes the TOEFL of the Language Testing Service of the USA.

International students will often need Visas – can the college help?

International students will incur more local living costs than UK students. Can the college help in arranging part time employment?

Some colleges profess to have special arrangements with UK universities which offer scholarships to their students or even “guarantee” places. By all means, ask for details but be aware that it is highly unlikely that these will be top quartile universities.

11. University & Careers Guidance

Given that most students progress to university, does the college offer guidance on degree course/university choice or careers. Many colleges will have dedicated counselors and others will expect tutors to mentor their particular students. Some will charge for this service – so, ask.

Some colleges will offer specific coaching on interview techniques or UCAS application writing.

If you need bespoke advice on university degrees, we can offer fee paid sessions with two “gurus” of UK university advice – Brian Heap or Phil Moss. Just call us on 0845 226 28 20

Last but not least finance has to be considered. All sixth-form colleges have a scale of charges that depends on the courses taken. These are fully published on their websites and it would be advisable to look at them to start with to ensure that the costs are within your budget! The average day tuition fees for a student taking 4 ASs or 3 A2s is going to be in the range of £14,000 to £16,500 per annum in Central London or Cambridge or Oxford. We can sometimes find students colleges down to £9,000 per annum outside of major City Centres.

Remember that accommodation costs are going to add between £6,000 to £9,000 to the tuition fees, if you need boarding.

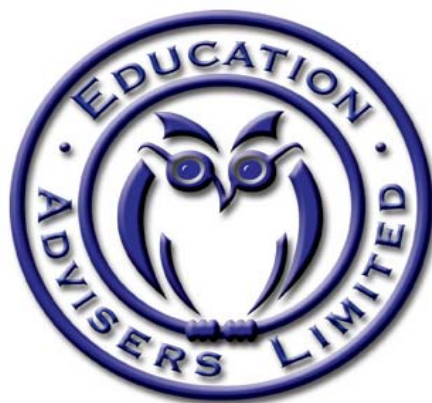
There may be Scholarships, Awards or Bursaries.

© Copyright Education Advisers Ltd 2009

Contact:

Education Advisers Ltd,
Long Acre,
66B Old Hadlow Road,
Tonbridge,
Kent,
TN10 4EX

Tel: 0845 226 28 20



Questions and Points to consider for Parents in choosing an Independent Sixth Form College

**A Check-List of Recommended Questions from the Parent's Perspective
Note – this is an *aide-memoire* to help you to remember what to ask.**

1. Is this College ideally suited to the academic aspirations, which you have for your child?
 - GCSEs?
 - Advanced Subsidiary Level (AS)?
 - A Levels (A2)?
 - International Baccalaureate?
 - Foundation degree?
2. Would your child be better suited to a traditional academic environment (with emphasis on traditional subject tuition in a disciplined environment) or a less formal approach (with less supervised work)?
3. How many hours will be spent in course tuition each week?
4. Can the college confirm that they can offer all of the subjects needed (Note: some colleges only put on a course once they have signed up say 3 students for that course)
5. Do you want to have your child close at hand or more distant with accommodation provided by the college?
6. What type of boarding accommodation is available at what cost? Dedicated student houses with supervision, or unsupervised houses or home stay with nearby families etc? How far is it from the college? What about meals, laundry, medical attention etc?
7. If you are transporting your child every day, how much will transport cost you?
8. What is the cultural mix of the college? What is the ratio of UK to international parents?
9. What are the costs?
 - Per term
 - Per subject
 - Boarding
 - Meals
 - Extra curricula subject charges

- Books
 - Other typical extras
10. Are there bursaries or scholarships which might be applicable to you? What are the criteria? Is there published information?
 11. What are the qualifications and experience of teachers? Are they full time or part time?
 12. What are the examination successes track record? Look for comparisons with www.best-schools.co.uk
 13. Is there a waiting list? Is it first come – first served?
 14. Did you like the Principal? Did you feel you received straight answers to your questions? What are his/her principles, policies and obsessions? How do the students react to the Principal – respect? warmth? fear? Did the Principal take an interest in YOUR child?
 15. Did the Principal “assess” your child and offer advice on what would best suit them?
 16. Did you like the other staff you met?
 17. Can you get additional personal tuition, if required?
 18. What is the school attitude to parental contact?
 19. What is the typical class size for the subjects required? Ask to see the classrooms and if possible some student work.
 20. How much has the school invested in technology? What are its ICT facilities? Does it teach pupils how to use up to date software? Do pupils get their own email addresses? What does its own website look like? Does it communicate with parents by email?
 21. What quality of facilities does the College have?
 - Main buildings
 - Classrooms
 - Hall
 - Accommodation
 - Sports
 - Arts
 - Drama
 - Computing
 - Media
 22. What is the school approach to discipline? Is it published? Will it suit your child’s temperament? Does it match your own views?
 23. Are there sets of published Rules – e.g discipline, bullying, drug abuse, dress code?
 24. What proportion of 6th formers go to university? What are their destinations? Does the College have dedicated higher education and careers advisers? Does the College “groom” students for University interviews or Oxbridge applications or medical school?
 25. Is there a Regulator’s school inspection report?
 26. What was your gut feeling on a personal visit on a normal College day?
 - The staff
 - The premises

- The facilities
- The atmosphere
- The students

27. What did you think of the students? Were they happy? Were they well mannered? Did they rush about ? Were they polite to teachers and visitors alike?
28. Does the College have any special links with employers for work experience or simply for students to supplement income on a part time basis?
29. If you are considering boarding – make sure you visit the dormitories and the common areas? Are the facilities modern and comfortable or spartan like an outward bound course? Can the children personalise their space with their own mementos? Make sure you meet the house supervisor. How do they get on with the pupils? What arrangements are made for boarders at weekends?
30. If you are an International student
 - Can the college help with English tuition if needed?
 - Does it help with visa applications?
 - Can it arrange travel to major airports?