



INSIDERS' GUIDE

Heart set on a UK boarding school? *Róisín Teeling* consults a panel of experts on how international families can navigate the process of applying and moving from abroad

THE PANEL

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When do families typically start planning a UK boarding school placement? The strategic advice is to start a school move at least two years in advance, and with some families we go back even earlier. That two-year window exists mainly because of entrance assessments; the UK curriculum tends to run about a year ahead, so there needs to be time to assess a child properly. The majority of our work happens on much shorter notice, as for international families the reason for a move can be much more urgent than for London-based families.
Nathaniel McCullagh

Why might a student visa application be delayed or refused? Most of the time, it comes down to documentation. There are very specific documents required, and translation particularly around the financial requirements is where it gets technical. Families have to show they can cover course fees and support themselves; the Home Office sets figures based on age, whether the child is boarding, and whether a parent is moving to the UK too. Crucially, funds have to be held for a full 28-day period by the right person, and the balance can't drop at any point during that window. It isn't just about the start and end figures.
Hannah Barnett

What does the admissions process look like for an international applicant? In practice, it's identical for UK and international families; the only real difference is logistical. If a child's current school doesn't run a test centre for either ISEB or CAT4, the exams will be invigilated remotely. There are also subject papers depending on age, an interview, and a review of school reports. Interviewing in person is good, since it gives both sides a better sense of the other, but it isn't essential. We don't fill all our year nine places at once, so it's never too late to start thinking about us at St Edward's.
Alastair Chirnside

How might families choose between schools when they haven't visited the UK? We gently advise families on potential schools by working on the basis of best fit and understanding the child's interests and abilities. We then build a sensible list with the parents, who are often more flexible than they expect once they understand the caveats of different schools. Most families arrive with the same handful of prestigious names, and we're always honest even when it risks disappointing a family. It's not just about whether a child can get into a school, but whether they'll thrive there.
Nathaniel McCullagh →



At St Edward's, the admissions process is identical for UK and international applicants



What do families need to know about the financial requirements? It's specific to each family's circumstances. What I would recommend, especially for families planning a staggered move where only some of the household relocates at first, is to plan for the biggest figure the situation could realistically require. Anything less than that becomes a nice surprise rather than a shortfall. *Hannah Barnett*

How do schools support children through the adjustment of arriving in the UK? At St Edward's, we run a series of familiarisation events spread across the year, so missing one doesn't mean missing out. Once term starts, our year nine induction runs a week ahead of the rest of the school, allowing new pupils to arrive without older children already filling the space around them. International boarders benefit from that gentler start. *Alastair Chirnside*

How has demand from international families changed in recent years? There's a constant tension around how many international students a school can take, and where these students come from. With the recent addition of

VAT on school fees, schools have had to open their doors more widely. In theory there are more spaces, but the vetting is stricter if anything, because schools are managing the balance of their cohort. *Nathaniel McCullagh*

Has demand changed on the visa side? Student visas are down overall; there isn't always a route for a parent to accompany a child over the age of 12, which puts some families off. Schools have become much stricter about who they'll issue a CAS [Confirmation of Acceptance for Studies – a document needed to apply for a UK student visa] to because the Home Office has tightened requirements, and schools are wary of anything that could jeopardise their sponsor licence. *Hannah Barnett*

Is there anything international families often don't expect about life at a UK boarding school? People imagine that you drop your child off and pick them up or they fly home, and that isn't true here anymore. We see it as a partnership with parents, not a service we provide instead of them, so we make a real effort to involve non-UK families in school life. *Alastair Chirnside* ■

LAST WORD

What's one thing every international family should know before starting the process?

It's a journey. Most families do end up at their first-choice school because they're usually well informed by the time they get to us. Starting early doesn't just mean sorting the school side – it means giving a child the space to build confidence for interviews and entrance tests, so a strong candidate doesn't miss out simply for lack of practice. The focus should be on what the child needs, not what's convenient for the parents. *Nathaniel McCullagh*

Everything takes longer than you think, particularly with the Home Office, so preparation is key. If you can start the process a year in advance, that gives you time to get every document watertight, rather than scrambling as deadlines approach. Don't assume an administrative review or appeal is the answer: these routes with the Home Office can take six to 12 months, by which point a school place is long gone. *Hannah Barnett*

Most families focus on the academics since that's where the anxiety about getting in sits, but that's only one part of the process, and children can end up under real pressure from sitting multiple tests. We're genuinely interested in who a child is and what they'll bring to the community, not just how they score, so being strong in other areas matters just as much as being drilled for tests. Parents can afford to take some of that pressure off. *Alastair Chirnside*