

Education

British educators tell students: Go and study abroad

LONDON

Rising fees at home lead record numbers to enroll overseas, at a savings

BY D.D. GUTTENPLAN

Caught between the rising cost of university tuition in England and the falling percentage of applicants offered places, one British school is giving its students some surprising advice.

By any measure Hockerill Anglo-European College is one of the most successful schools in Britain. Named last month as one of the government's flagship academies, its students regularly come at or near the top of exam results for the entire country, outperforming such famous names as Eton or Harrow.

But unlike those private schools, where fees can exceed £28,000, or \$45,000, a year, Hockerill, in the Hertfordshire town of Bishop's Stortford, is a state comprehensive, which charges no tuition fees and is forbidden from selecting its students on the basis of academic ability. And while a third of Hockerill's 830 students are boarders, they are chosen on the basis of need rather than ability to pay. So when Simon Dennis, the school's principal, heard of government plans to triple university tuition fees in England to £9,000 a year, he decided to make use of the school's international focus, urging his students to apply to universities abroad and hiring a counselor to help students apply to universities in countries whose fees are cheaper.

"If you can get into the École Normale Supérieure in France and pay about £180 a year for an education at one of the best institutions in the world, why would you pay £9,000 a year in Britain?" Mr. Dennis asked.

Pupils at Hockerill are offered a choice of seven foreign languages: French, German, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Japanese or Mandarin. History and geography classes are taught exclusively in French or German. But with English rapidly becoming the international language of education, even less linguistically flexible students soon find that going abroad can save them money while enhancing the quality of their education.



Students in Maastricht, the Netherlands, where the university offers a highly regarded undergraduate program taught in English, for tuition of €1,672 a year, far less than in Britain.

"Our students can get to Maastricht by train more quickly than they can get to Leeds from London," Mr. Dennis said. In the Netherlands just over the border from Germany and Belgium, Maastricht University offers a highly regarded undergraduate program taught in English. Tuition fees are €1,672, about £1,430, a year. Germany and France offer even greater savings.

Gus Botsford, a Londoner now in his first year at Maastricht, says he has no regrets about leaving Britain. "I'm at University College, which has a very international atmosphere," he said, adding that for him the chance to study a broader curriculum, closer to an Ameri-

can liberal arts college than the highly-focused single subject approach common in Britain, was more important than difference in cost. "I have about twice as many contact hours with faculty as some students in England," he added.

Alex Usher, president of Higher Education Strategy Associates, a Canadian policy research institute, doubts the British government reckoned on the effect of raising fees in a global market. In a report issued this month, Mr. Usher said the rise was "the largest single increase in tuition fees anywhere in the world since records began," adding that while the availability of student loans means poorer students will be better off

in the short term, the government has done "virtually nothing to reduce the net cost of education for low-income students — a policy which is the cornerstone of U.S. efforts to increase access."

"It will be interesting to see what pressure this puts even on other parts of the British system," Mr. Usher said in an interview. Pointing out that Wales has decided not to increase fees, while Scottish universities are still free (to Scottish students; English students in Scotland pay from £1,820 to £2,895 a year), he said, "If I had the choice of paying £4,000 a year in Cardiff or £9,000 a year down the road in England — I'm going to Cardiff."

The shortage of university places in the past year has already prompted a record number of British students to study outside the country.

At a Westminster Forum conference last week in London on the future of education, Vincenzo Raimo, an official at Nottingham University, said that there are already about 22,000 U.K. students enrolled in degree programs overseas. "There are more British students, as a percentage of full degree students, than there are from China and India," said Mr. Raimo, whose office runs campuses of Nottingham in Malaysia and China.

With more than 2,400 programs in English just in the non-English speak-

ing parts of Europe, students can choose to study medicine at San Raffaele University in Milan; economics at Aarhus University in Finland; law at Leiden in the Netherlands; or business at the IE Business School in Madrid.

But the global spread of English has its critics, not all of whom are motivated by nationalism or linguistic chauvinism. Wolfgang Mackiewicz, president of the European Language Council in Berlin, worries that in classrooms where neither the teacher nor the students are native speakers of English the level of instruction is reduced to "the lowest common denominator."

"I'm not allergic to the use of English at our universities," he said. "Our academics have to be able to publish their research in English. But they also have to be able to communicate their findings to the local and national communities. There are countries in Europe where people think they're bilingual, but if you ask them to write they can't do it." There is a danger, he added, that "Europe could be reduced to just one gray language. We need people to be not just bilingual but bi-literate."

"Clearly, there are lots of growing pains as English-language programs expand," countered Ben Wildavsky, a senior fellow at the Kauffman Foundation and author of "The Great Brain Race." "But what's the alternative? Will a critical mass of foreign students be learning Swedish or Finnish or Chinese in order to study in those countries? I don't think so. The more universities offer programs in English, the more foreign students they can attract. That's good for the universities, and it's good for foreign students, who will be able to find opportunities that they might not have had otherwise."

Mr. Botsford, the Maastricht student, said that "as a native speaker, things can sometimes be frustrating," but for the most part he has been pleasantly surprised. "All of our tutorials are debate-based, with 12 students sitting in a room arguing about things. The level is very high."

There are only 4 or 5 British students out of 500 at his college. But last year Maastricht started an ad campaign aimed at Britain. "Considering the way things are going at home," Mr. Botsford said, he's expecting plenty of company.