

SPECIAL REPORT STUDY ABROAD

Success overseas

International universities can teach us a thing or two, finds **Jessica Moore**

Londoner Katy Ridsdill-Smith struggled to make plans for university. Having gained a place to study geography at the University of Sheffield, she deferred entry. "I knew deep down that the course wasn't for me," she explains. She then switched course to French and Spanish, and applied for international development and languages at the University of East Anglia. Nothing felt right.

In the meantime, while working in Germany, she discovered the liberal arts and sciences course at University College Freiburg (UCF). An interdisciplinary programme most commonly found in the United States, it has more recently been embraced in continental Europe. Students choose from a wide range of subjects and gradually narrow down their fields of specialism. Everything clicked. "The programme combines all my interests," says Ridsdill-Smith, now aged 21 and in her first year at the German institution.

Such continental drift holds increasing appeal for young Brits, according to the British Council. Its 2014 report, *Broadening Horizons*, found that a staggering 37 per cent of UK students were considering overseas study – compared to 20pc the previous year. Opportunities are rising in tandem. The European Universities Central Application Support Service (Eunicas), through which UK and Irish students can apply for degree programmes at European universities, says there are now just under 1,000 courses taught exclusively in English at continental institutions.

"There is a wide selection of English-taught degrees, tuition fees are low and there are some excellent universities," says the head of Eunicas, Guy Flouch. Maastricht University, for example, offers 13 English-taught undergraduate degree programmes and currently has 301 British students – up from 220 in 2012-13.

But what are the benefits of eschewing our own internationally renowned higher-education system for pastures new?

"In the UK, you tend to focus on just one or two subjects – you don't commonly have courses with such breadth," says Ridsdill-Smith, who is currently studying French and German alongside topics in epistemology and slavery.

Alex Peake, 21, gives a similar review. Originally from Oxfordshire, he is in the second year of his liberal arts and sciences degree at Maastricht. "I can pick what I like from a huge range of subjects. That has given me the freedom to work out what I enjoy and what I'm good at," he says.

Another difference can be found in the teaching style. While the UK higher-education model tends to be based around

Euro vision: clockwise from below right, University College Freiburg; trendsetting at Amsterdam Fashion Academy; socialising in and around Maastricht University

Ucas heads to Europe

As well as applying to domestic universities in record-breaking numbers, there's no doubt that students are increasingly looking further afield. They're aware overseas education may incur significantly lower fees while offering broader cultural and educational experiences.

In recognition of this, Ucas – which manages university applications – has opened admissions beyond the UK. From this year, would-be undergraduates can apply directly to participating EU institutions that meet Ucas's standards relating to academic quality and financial stability.

It has been a slow start – signing up in January, the Amsterdam Fashion Academy is currently the only international university using this service for full degrees. But others may soon follow suit, including the Netherlands' University of Groningen.

"We don't yet know what the demand is, but we're offering students that choice," says Ucas spokesman James Woodward. "Over the next few years we could see more European institutions become part of our admissions system."



large-scale lectures, seminars and written assignments, many international undergraduate programmes favour oral presentations and group discussion in small cohorts. Dutch and Danish universities in particular promote problem-based learning (PBL), where students express ideas and explore each other's research under the supervision of a tutor.

"PBL is tough," warns Flouch. "Students are assessed on discussion sessions, so it's important they contribute. But in the UK, we're so used to being fed information by teachers and lecturers that doing independent research and presenting it to a group can be a challenge."

Another stumbling block for Brits can be oral exams, although small class sizes make it less scary, points out Paul Sterzel, managing director of UCF. "Students engage with each other, the professor and the topic at hand," he says. "We select our students carefully, looking for those who are open to self-driven learning."

Entry requirements, therefore, are often lower internationally than they are at UK universities. "The onus isn't on getting good grades to get in," Peake explains. "It's on performing well enough to stay."

As for the attraction of international universities, the biggest drivers cited by UK students in the British Council report included experiencing other cultures (19pc) and travelling overseas (16pc). This is backed up by their preferred destinations: seven of the top 10 were non-English-speaking countries, including Japan, Spain

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and China. In the Netherlands, says Peake, "the drinking culture that plagues the UK isn't so prevalent and there's a great range of people from different nationalities. You also get fantastic exchange opportunities. I'm about to go to Sydney".

Thinking long-term, "British employers say they want people with international experience", notes Tim Sowula of the British Council. "For the UK to remain competitive, it's important that the next generation is able to interact with the global market. Studying abroad is a fantastic way to gain those skills."

But with exclusively UK and US institutions in the QS World University Rankings' top 10, do British students risk compromising the quality of their education by jetting off? Flouch thinks not. "Those who study abroad, and their parents, comment on how quickly they've matured and how their skill sets have broadened."

Ridsdill-Smith and Peake are certainly impressed with the standard of their courses, and institutions in Australia, Canada, China, Denmark, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Japan, the Netherlands, Singapore, South Korea and Switzerland all made QS's top 50 last year.

"People exaggerate the risks of studying abroad," concludes Ridsdill-Smith. "If it doesn't work out, you can always come back. I've managed to get budget flights home for less than £10 and the whole journey takes five hours door-to-door. My advice is to sort out the practicalities, then just go for it. I have no regrets."

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