

# Grown-up school

The sixth form opens up a wealth of opportunities to pupils: the chance to try boarding in preparation for university life, study a bespoke course or to simply expand their vision of the world. By **Patricia Carswell**

**T**he road to GCSEs is a long and often wearisome one; reams of coursework and endless rote learning can leave pupils longing for something new and exciting. Some students consider moving to sixth form college, or at least to another school for sixth form, and although most stay where they are, a significant minority do decide to make the change.

Moving schools can be a major upheaval though, so what is the lure of switching at this stage?

For some, the chance to move into, or away, from boarding is the principal motivation. Robert Taylor, registrar at Harrow School, explains:

“One of the major reasons would be to experience boarding prior to going on to university. Often boys will be coming from a smaller school with perhaps limited opportunities, at a stage in their life when they feel ready to cope with it. I think they get a lot out of those two years.”

Boarding can expose pupils to a more sophisticated, international world than any they have previously experienced. This is the motivation for many new sixth formers at Roedean, says Director of Admissions, Zoë Marlow.

“Roedean has had international girls for some time and we're very proud of them. The goal of the school is to have women that are as comfortable living or working here in the UK as they are in Dubai or Australia. Some provincial schools

can't give that same reach.”

At UWC Atlantic College in south Wales - an international, independent school for 16 to 18 year-olds - students are drawn from all over the world, and from all socio-economic groups.

Eighteen year-old Rosario Freire, joined UWC Atlantic College from Chile. “My main reasons [for coming to the college] were the opportunity to experience something completely different, to share my culture and to expand my vision of the world.”

Acting Principal Paul Motte adds that for its British students, the International Baccalaureate taught there is a factor. “It is an attraction, particularly for those with aspirations to go to university

outside the UK,” he says.

Boarding isn't for everyone, though, and at DLD College - an independent sixth form college in London - it can be the thought of escaping from boarding that attracts some of its students. According to Principal David Lowe, “We have



## Important questions to consider

### What do you want to get out of sixth form?

- First off, is your priority good A level results and being able to get into the university of your choice?
- Are you looking for broader experiences, e.g. mixing with international students/community activities/work experience?
- How important are extra-curricular activities such as music and sport?
- Are you keen to take responsibility for younger students?

### How self-motivated are you?

- Are you organised and good at structuring your study time?
- Do you get your GCSE coursework done on time and without help or do you rely on teachers/parents/or other students?
- How would you cope in a less-structured environment where you were left to your own devices?

### Are there aspects of your current

### school with which you are currently less than happy with?

- If so, can they be solved by discussion/negotiation/the different regime of sixth form at your present school?
- What do current sixth formers in your school have to say about these issues?
- Are you sure that these issues would be any different in a new school or sixth form college?

### What have you achieved at your current school e.g. in terms of responsibilities/extra-curricular activities/relationships with students and staff?

- Are you prepared to leave these behind?

### How ready are you for the intellectual leap to A levels?

- Would you be able to cope with adapting to a new school alongside getting used to the rigours of A-levels?
- How does your chosen school assist sixth formers with the transition?



Roedean is especially proud of its international students

students who come from schools out in the home counties. In general they are very happy in their schools - they think they're brilliant for many things - but they think, 'I'm now that little bit older; I have a group of friends in London and I'm stuck out here in the back of beyond!'

For any student wishing to focus on retakes, colleges such as the Oxford Tutorial College may be the answer. According to its Principal, Joel Roderick, "in mainstream schools they are focused on A levels and it's very difficult for them to give any kind of revision guidance or teaching for students who are coming back. That's why you have retake colleges. We provide a very bespoke course."

Even for those wanting to go straight on to A levels, there is an important distinction between dedicated sixth form colleges and mainstream schools. Sixth form colleges claim to offer a more adult world, as Stuart Nicholson, Principal of Cambridge Centre for Sixth Form Studies (CCSS), explains.

"Some students have outgrown the constraints that a typical school generally operates", he says. "I

know that for most schools those constraints are seen as structures and supports, but for the more independent students, those school structures are starting to seem babyish."

According to David Lowe at DLD the main difference is, "being able to treat people as young adults - as a putative university student."

Emily Brown, 18, now in her second year at CCSS, found that the greater independence at sixth form college helped her with her studies.



DLD offers students bespoke courses

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"I didn't do very well at my old school," she says. "But this year my results were much better and I think just having the freedom has made me manage my time better."

Yet a more adult approach is not exclusive to sixth form colleges; many mainstream schools treat their sixth form students differently from the other pupils in the school.

"There are a lot of status things whereby they're treated differently," says Robert Taylor of Harrow. "I certainly treat a lower sixth class differently from how I treat a fifth form class."

However, not everyone is convinced that changing schools after GCSEs is a wise choice.

"I think it's a terrible move to make," says Dr Helen Wright, President of the Girls' School Association and headmistress of St Mary's Calne in Wiltshire.

"It's a very bad time to move because you have already embarked on this three-year programme of exams and you're thinking about moving one year into it. You've built up relationships with teachers; you've established good working styles; you're embedded in the wider life of the school; you're going to be taking on more responsibility. Your life at the school is enriching and coming to fruition and then you uproot and move."

Certainly the increased rigour required by AS courses can be a challenge when combined with the social challenges involved in changing schools. As Rosario Freire says: "At the beginning the academic part was terrible, really frustrating, plus all the emotional issues were a hard experience, but I think also one of the biggest challenges."

Anyone considering a move after GCSEs should think hard about their reasons for wanting to move and what their expectations are of sixth form.

Laura Hendry, 17, who moved from Gordonstoun to Haberdashers' Monmouth School for Girls for sixth form, gives wise advice.

"I would urge those thinking of changing to consider what it is they want to get out of sixth form. It is a decision that needs to be thoroughly thought through and it's important to acknowledge all the advantages (and potential disadvantages) in doing so. Personally, it's a decision that I do not regret at all."