

EDUCATION LIFE

A Guide to Getting a Bachelor's Abroad

By PAUL HOCKENOS NOV. 2, 2016

There was a time when the self-confident undergraduate took a semester or two abroad to taste an unfamiliar culture and dip a toe into the waters of higher education on a foreign shore. Today, tasting is timid stuff.

While graduate programs have long attracted international students, undergraduates are seizing upon the vast opportunities to enroll in foreign colleges for a complete bachelor's degree. The number of options to do so is growing by the year. The online platform StudyPortals reports an estimated 5,670 English-language degrees in non-Anglophone countries. In Europe alone, 300 colleges and universities offer more than 1,500 English-taught bachelor's degrees, according to Beyond the States, an international college adviser.

The benefits of a thoroughly international education in the age of globalization are conspicuous. But the game-changer is that college abroad can save parents tens of thousands of dollars. In many countries, including Turkey, Thailand, Brazil, Iceland and some in continental Europe, college is either free or virtually so, with tuition less than a couple thousand dollars. Many other universities offer a bachelor's degree for under \$7,000 a year.

Icing on the cake: It's possible to obtain financial aid, both need- and merit-based, from universities outside the United States, as well as government aid from home. (The Department of Education website lists nearly 900 foreign colleges and universities where Americans can use federal financial aid.)

A bachelor's abroad isn't for everybody. Students must be prepared to immerse themselves in the customs of an unfamiliar habitat far from home. It's an endeavor for the intensely curious and resourceful, those who can adapt to systems that do grading, testing and instruction quite differently. Forget intercollegiate sports, frats and clubs. Even partying is not the same — less binge drinking, for example — and campus life, when there is any, isn't as cozy. But the rewards are great, say graduates and educators, and recognized by employers seeking go-getters.

Giovanni Hashimoto, a 23-year-old out of Washington, D.C., transferred to the University of Milan after two years at Pacific Union College in California. Though it took some digging online and follow-up emails, Mr. Hashimoto, who speaks no Italian, found what he wanted in the university's English-language political science and economics program. With tuition at \$4,000, he calculates he saves \$20,000 a year studying in Italy.

But, more critically, acquaintances in Washington's world of public policy and politics, where he wants to eventually work, told him that a foreign degree "connotes a willingness to try things outside one's comfort zone" and would work in his favor.

United Kingdom

The British Isles have catered to overseas students for, quite literally, centuries, and to masses of Americans since the day Bill Clinton "read" at Oxford in the '60s.

Of course, if you don't have a Rhodes scholarship as Mr. Clinton did, studying in Britain can be pricey: between \$16,000 and \$20,000 a year for humanities programs at most of the top colleges, less for smaller names. Oxford and Cambridge charge another \$6,000 to \$10,000 in special college fees. Everywhere in Britain you have to tack on about \$4,000 for degrees in natural sciences, and even more for medical and veterinary programs.

But the three-year diplomas in England and Wales will tempt the impatient

and undercapitalized, and many schools besides Cambridge and Oxford have global reputations. Imperial College London and University College London rank right up with the Ivies, too, with the likes of the University of Edinburgh, King's College London, the University of Manchester and the London School of Economics close behind. Most are nearly as packed with international students as the University of Sussex near Brighton, 27 percent of whose graduates hail from abroad.

The admissions process involves a sliver of the stress, and mystery, that colleges in the United States insist upon. Apply to up to five universities via the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service. Lists of extracurricular activities are of little interest. Requirements usually include SAT or ACT scores, a single reference and an essay explaining your passion for a particular field, often with Advanced Placement and/or SAT subject test scores to back it up. Websites will tell you the minimum acceptable scores, and if you hit them, you are likely to get in — with the exception of the ultrapicky Oxbridgians. Cambridge accepted 23 of 323 American applicants into its class of 2018; Oxford took in 40 of 563. (Cambridge wants at least a 1460 SAT or 32 ACT; University College London will take a 1380 or 29, the University of York a 1200 or 26.)

A knuckleball for many teenagers, and this goes for much of Europe and beyond: Applicants must pick a major and stick to it. So from the get-go you have to know what you want to study. You apply not just to a given university, but to a specific degree program or college within it. This goes for medicine and dentistry, too.

So, forget the broad-based liberal arts thing, and all the requirements affixed to it. There are no general ed or writing 101 classes. You're expected to be able to write a topic sentence upon arrival. And in general, there's much less hype over grades, which are based on a final exam or paper — no quizzes, midterms, multiple choice. No taking of attendance, either.

Scotland is a wee bit different. Undergraduate programs last four years, and allow students to switch majors midstream. The University of St. Andrews and the

University of Edinburgh are longtime international favorites despite the bland cuisine and grim seasons — the more northerly you venture, the darker the winters. Both double over backward to please (after all, overseas tuition is a cash cow). They provide orientation for “first years” (say “freshman” and you’ll get guffawed out of the room), dorms and meal plans, trips to whisky distilleries and Gaelic festivals called ceilidhs. Edinburgh even has a North American student society.

Ireland

Irish universities roll out the red carpet, too. International students are even assigned advisers to help bridge gaps. A 2015 survey by StudyPortals of 17,000 international students found they were happiest on the Emerald Isle, appreciative of the community atmosphere, support structures for foreigners and vibrant student life. (Of 18 countries, Britain polled a lowly 10th; students gripe about high living costs and subpar housing. France came in dead last on account of poor student services.)

Trinity College Dublin, the alma mater of Beckett and Swift, is highest ranked of Irish institutions and so most desirable. You’ll bump up against almost 700 American students on campus, some 200 of them working toward a bachelor’s — 48 percent more than just three years ago. Trinity requires a minimum 1290 SAT or 28 ACT and a B+ average. Tuition, about \$20,000 to \$25,000, is competitive with top British programs.

Less prestigious names, like the National University of Ireland Galway, the University of Limerick and the University College Cork, charge about \$14,000 and are in cities cheaper than Dublin. Cork has an award-winning green campus with an environmentally minded curriculum to match.

Continental Europe

The amazing perk of Europe’s public universities is their price tag. In Germany, Norway, France and Austria, they are largely free to anyone from

anywhere in the world. Plus, health care is often fully covered, and housing aid available.

The rationale for this incredibly generous offer to nontaxpaying foreign nationals is itself an incentive to study in Hamburg or Oslo. With its slumped demographics, Germany wants highly educated people to keep its world-class economy chugging when Germans are too few to do so themselves. In a globalized world, the Netherlands and the Nordics want to bolster their knowledge economies with the world's brightest, as well as attract international research funding. Foreign students also fuel local economies, whether they pay tuition or not. According to the German Academic Exchange Service, half of foreign students remain after graduation.

Germany, like most of Europe, is a newcomer to the bachelor's degree, part of an overhaul of the traditional universität that was implemented, at first ungladly, at the European Union's behest. But now Europeans have the drill down, and more English-taught undergraduate programs crop up every year. There were nearly 200 in Germany in 2016, according to the German Academic Exchange Service; about 680 Americans were working toward their B.A. last year, which while not an invasion is almost double that of six years ago.

Most English-language bachelor's at public universities are still in fields that use English anyway, such as English lit or American studies, as well as computer science, hotel management, international relations and international law. Along the Rhine River, deep in viticulture country, Geisenheim University offers an English-language degree in international wine business. And this year, for the first time, a foreigner can study management and technology at the renowned Technical University of Munich, paying for just the cost of living in Bavaria's capital, about a half-hour from the Alps.

Command of a country's lingua franca opens the door to hundreds more "bilingual bachelor's," taught in the native language and English. With advanced German and high school A's, one could win admission to the top-ranked Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munchen (L.M.U. Munich) or to Heidelberg University,

as well as Humboldt University in Berlin (Hegel's old office is just behind the main building).

But students say that to do the half-German route, your language skills better be up to snuff. "Doing your bachelor's degree in German requires a very high knowledge of German that most American students will not attain in such a short time," said Sofia Isabel Fabiancic, a New York City native who dropped out of New York University's Berlin-based program as a junior because she wanted "a more immersive experience." She applied straightaway to the Free University of Berlin. "I had a perfect G.P.A. at N.Y.U. and am now getting really mediocre grades, working harder than I ever did," she said. But she believes the "huge challenge" will pay off in the end.

The same language caveat goes for studies in Spain, where several hundred bilingual courses are listed, along with classes for polishing up your español. The University of Lille in France and the University of Liège in Belgium offer bilingual B.A.s, but you might want to record lectures for later review, as the French comes at you fast and furious.

Most European programs require foreign students to take at least one introductory class in the native tongue, and if English isn't your native tongue, you have to pass a proficiency test. But in general, the application processes are even easier than those in Britain.

Turkish, Dutch, Danish and Polish universities proffer a palette of majors for Anglophones, as well as a few, such as plastic arts in Turkey or Slavic philology in Poland, that you won't find most anywhere else. Poland's picturesque student cities of Cracow and Wroclaw are now on the international radar, the newest hot spots among foreign students, even those who hate beets.

The Netherlands has about 300 English-language undergraduate degree programs at 42 universities, most of which cost \$7,000 to \$13,000 a year. Internationals obsessed with the nitty-gritty of how Europe works can enroll in European Union studies at Maastricht University or the University of Amsterdam,

a short hop by train to the heart of it all in Brussels. But the Dutch don't own the field: The London School of Economics and the European University Viadrina, which straddles the Oder River along the German-Polish border, are also big names in E.U.-focused courses.

On the Continent, undergraduates are more on their own than in the Anglo-Saxon world, both on and off campus. Foreign students can feel a bit lost, especially at first. Some European programs tend to stress theory in a big way, which can throw hands-on types. In many countries, student housing is an option for one year, but not always beyond that.

A bit more mothering comes at a price. There are private colleges, like Schiller International University in Heidelberg and Bard College Berlin. Tuition at Schiller, which also has campuses in Florida, London, Madrid and Paris, is about \$17,700, while Bard's offbeat liberal arts program, strong in social and political thought, runs \$27,000 for tuition, room and board. The Bard program is heavy on theory, too — ethics, aesthetics, modernism, the Greeks — but on its leafy campus, professors take the thoroughly international student body through the canon in small, informal groups, spoon in hand.

In Italy, where public universities are notoriously tough to navigate, there's John Cabot University, an accredited American university smack in the middle of Rome. Its art history and classical studies majors spend as much time in museums and clambering over archaeological sites as in the classroom.

"I've learned about my own country through the eyes of people who don't come from it," said Gillian McMurray, a John Cabot senior from Chicago. Ms. McMurray admits that the lower cost played in her decision to study abroad, noting that her four years will cost less than her brother's at University of Michigan. She's learned how to speak and write in Italian and, she says, no longer hangs around exclusively with other Americans, the way the semester-abroad students tend to do.

"I've become more aware of myself," she said.

Australia

Academies Down Under are a magnet for international students, not least because their Foreign Ministry doles out plentiful scholarships. That's critical, because the average cost of an academic year is comparatively pricey — about \$23,000 to \$28,000 in tuition alone — though many programs take only three years to complete.

Australian National University (ranked 22nd in the world by QS World University Rankings), the University of Melbourne and the University of Sydney all carry the imprimatur of first-rate centers of research and learning. At the University of Queensland, undergraduates can study marine sciences at field stations on the Great Barrier Reef in disciplines like physical and molecular science, engineering, ecology, nature conservation and global change science. And internationals rave about the robust campus life, beaches and cosmopolitan cities.

Singapore

This island nation of 5.5 million has six national universities, all steeped in the British tradition, a hangover from colonial rule that serves it well today. English is one of the city-state's four official languages, but you can always learn a bit of Mandarin, Malay or Tamil.

The “lion city” is known for its thriving, globalized economy and is fast becoming a hub of higher education. The universities, like the top-flight National University of Singapore (tuition: \$21,125), are as international as the city, with one in five students from abroad. The University of Chicago Booth School of Business, Yale and the Technical University of Munich are among private Western universities with collaborative programs there. Another plus: The travel opportunities — to Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia — are mouthwatering.

China

Bachelor's programs in English have been sprouting like wild dandelions

across the middle kingdom, most of them in business and technical fields, reflecting the Chinese economy's keen interest in graduates with expertise in those subjects and knowledge of Chinese ways. The University of Science and Technology of China, widely considered among China's finest, is just one example; it offers bachelor's degrees in English in materials science and engineering and in environmental engineering. The country's ambitious goal is to double its international students by 2020 to half a million.

So far, though, at least from the West, it's been mostly students with Chinese in their family tree who have ventured to Chinese universities. The cultural differences, from gastronomy to pedagogy, present a strange world to most young people from foreign shores.

Insiders gripe that the big, traditional universities simply translate their standard curriculum into English, which makes the programs a better fit for native Chinese students with strong English than for Western students. Even those fired up to learn Mandarin are best advised to have some under their belt before taking the plunge. But with annual tuition rates between \$3,300 and \$9,900, and cheap student digs, there are open-ended possibilities there for those who see the future in a rising China.

An easier way to go is the Sino-British College in Shanghai (tuition, room, board: \$15,000). This pioneer project, now a decade old, is the brainchild of nine universities in Britain and the University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, situated on the latter's campus in this buzzing port city. The four-year bachelor's is British, as is most of the teaching power. Students can switch to one of the British universities or do the whole program in China. The college prides itself on nurturing cross-cultural smarts and placing graduates in companies in Asia, like Volkswagen and Accenture. If China seems a long way to go for a college visit, take the two-and-a-half minute YouTube tour.

You can also look into N.Y.U. Shanghai, one of three pillars of New York University's global network, along with Abu Dhabi and New York City. N.Y.U. has caught plenty of flak for locating liberal arts programs in countries ruled by

monarchs and Communists, but it contends that its schools are unimpeded bastions of free thought in illiberal environments. Shanghai, like Abu Dhabi, is a full undergraduate campus. It costs about the same, too, at \$64,722 a year, including travel, room and board.

The internationals say they love the “craziness” of Shanghai, and after a bit feel at home. “There’s no divide between the Chinese nationals, Americans and other foreign students here,” said Noah Greyson Singer from Jupiter, Fla., who rooms with a Chinese national. The program currently has 1,112 undergraduates — 54 percent Chinese nationals, 28 percent American and the remainder from 64 other countries. Mr. Singer admits to having felt a pang of homesickness at first, but got over it with the help of Skype.

“Family and friends,” he said, “are just a call away.”

Correction: November 6, 2016

An article on Page 21 this weekend about obtaining a bachelor’s degree abroad misidentifies the alma mater of James Joyce. It is the University College Dublin, not Trinity College Dublin. The article also misidentifies the country that is home to the University of Liege. It is Belgium, not France. And the article misidentifies a university that ranks alongside Ivies. It is the University of Edinburgh, not Edinburgh College. Paul Hockenos, who is based in Berlin, is author of “Berlin Calling: A Story of Anarchy, Loud Music, the Wall and the Birth of the New Berlin,” to be published in the spring.

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