

## **‘What impressions of British life and education will you take home with you?’**

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The first question that I get asked every time I tell someone I go to a British boarding school is always ‘Oh – is it like Hogwarts?’

How do you respond to that? In some ways, it is and in others, it isn’t. When I first saw the magnificent 17<sup>th</sup> century building shrouded in fog, overlooking the enormous school grounds from atop a hill, I was overwhelmed by the aura of history and tradition and a promise of undiscovered academic opportunities – anyone would be, after spending 11 years being educated in cold and grey concrete cubes, where the teachers’ enthusiasm doesn’t make up for the lack of funding and students’ attitudes. And even though the novelty wore off after a few weeks, I wasn’t disappointed.

Suddenly free to choose my own subjects and take advantage of the amazing resources offered, I took to my studies like a duck to water – they weren’t that different, after all. Except that the classes were not crowded, and the teachers weren’t overworked and gladly offered help when I struggled with some new, unexpected facet of the education system. Except that the students seemed to take the subjects seriously. Except that the system wasn’t rigorously restrictive, but encouraged independent thought through writing essays and own research and allowed for a degree of freedom I wasn’t used to. It was not perfect, oh no – when there are no terrifying, caffeine driven teachers who mark your every assignment and count it towards the final result, there is a certain lack of pressure and motivation, which seems to later accumulate in the few weeks before the external examinations start. You are more likely to quickly put together your essay the day it is due when you know there will be no direct consequences on your future and the exams seem so far away – but then again, it encourages self discipline and time management, because in the end, all the work that you’ve done matters. The infamous British cuisine is not actually that different from the meals usually served in most school kitchens and the numerous rules regulating dress code and access to facilities are a necessary evil you get used to very quickly.

Another vastly different aspect of the school life that I really enjoy is the range of extracurricular activities offered – from rugby and tennis over film club to community service, all of them are taken seriously and a legitimate part of the education process. I’ve never dreamt of being a public speaker, but when a classmate invited me to join the debating society, I thought ‘why not?’ and found that I was having great fun and was even quite good at it. After encountering the inevitable condescension of a few unpleasant individuals that every school has, my angrily written speech on the importance of languages and cultural diversity got me a runner up place in the Rotary club competition held at the time.

Encouragement to use all my experience and being offered opportunities to gain more is an integral part of what I like about my school. And that is perhaps the most important idea I will take home with me – don’t be afraid to try new things and branch out. Look for opportunities and use them, and cherish every new experience as a learning one. Don’t be self depreciating and don’t be scared of sounding too serious. As I was told at a brilliant lecture during the orientation course in Cambridge – freedom is merely the opportunity to be the most you can be. Don’t waste it.