

Mariam Ghalumyan
Armenia (2025)

‘Taking the plunge: life in a British boarding school’

As I am sitting on the newly installed hammock on a Friday evening in St.Swithun’s school, surrounded by a beautiful garden full of trees and flowers, the full sun is shining onto my face (and yes, it’s not actually raining). Listening to my new friend excitedly telling me about the book she is reading at the moment, I start thinking about the biggest risk that I have ever taken.

It feels like it was yesterday when I was sitting in front of my notebook opened on the HMC application page, asking my mom whether it was the right thing to do. 'You will never know if you don't try,' my mother said softly. I pressed the submit button, completely unaware of what awaited me in the future. But, at the same time, that moment feels like a lifetime ago and I barely recognise the scared girl who was sitting next to her mom that evening. From not knowing anyone at my new school to making new lifelong friends, from studying alone in my room to late-night study sessions in the boarding houses with friends, from fearing of taking A-level Physics to achieving the result I wanted, from submitting that button to embracing every new opportunity, this journey has turned me into a new, more confident, more flexible, and stronger person.

Ever since I moved to St Swithun’s school, I have been impressed by all the opportunities that the HMC Program and the school have given to me. I have tried new sports like Tennis and Pilates, been selected as the House Art Representative and Deputy Head of Art in school, and volunteered at local schools helping children with reading. I have helped younger years at my school with their projects during Art Club, initiated my personal Art project about Armenian architecture, started working on my Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) in the field of my interest, attended Math Clubs and led weekend Math Clubs. Additionally, I hosted academic lunches about Armenian language and Mythical Architectural Buildings. All of these experiences, along with many others, showed me that taking the risks and opportunities I did, even small ones, opened new doors for me that I never knew existed and shaped a better version of myself. I also understand that I still have much more to learn and achieve.

Looking back, I would love to give a long hug to the sixteen year old Mariam who was packing sixteen years of her life in a suitcase with a huge fear and excitement in her eyes. I would also give a hug to seventeen year old Mariam who was sitting in her new boarding house room completely alone after saying goodbye to her family. I would tell her that loneliness will soon turn into laughter shared with friends, that fear will give way to confidence, and that she will find her place in a world she once thought was too big and too far away. Most importantly, I would tell her that it was all worth it, all the challenges she overcame eventually led her to where she is now-living her dream life, with a strong belief that wonderful and bright things await her in future.

Taking the plunge was terrifying. But sitting here, in the golden light of a Friday evening, I know it was the best decision I have ever made. And only now I understand the value of the words that my mom said to me ‘You will never know if you don’t try it’.