



Choosing the right Sixth Form for your child

By Mr Dominic Simmons, Head of Sixth Form

Throughout my time as a Head of Sixth Form, often taking responsibility for careers provision, I have always looked forward to my one-to-one conversations with students as they approach important decision points, choosing their GCSE or A Level options, and ultimately settling on a degree course or career pathway. It is one of the most fulfilling parts of my job – to see uncertainty fading away, a sense of relief that they don't need to have all the answers just yet, often a glimmer of excitement as a possible inspiration clicks into place. During these conversations, I am sometimes told that after a few years at Rookwood – or another independent school – during which time students have developed vastly improved working habits, have grown in confidence, and have made excellent academic progress, that they then need to go to a large college environment for Sixth Form, in order to “get used to” the environment that they will encounter at university. I profoundly disagree, for two reasons.

Learning models

Firstly, the idea that a large state college is at all “like” a university campus rests on superficial comparisons at best. Yes, there will be several thousand students on site, and yes, students will dress casually and come and go more or less as they please. But this is about as far as the parallels run. By necessity, college A Level groups run at around 25 or 30 students in a group. University students, admittedly, may have lectures with several hundred in the audience, but the bulk of their teaching will be in seminar groups of 10 to 15, far closer to Rookwood's model of around six per group. Famously, Oxford and Cambridge run the bulk of their teaching in tutorial groups of one or two, and all university lecturers will run office hours for students to discuss their work individually. What counts is students' comfort when discussing their work individually with a tutor, their familiarity with a partnership model of learning, rather than the experience of being lost in a big teaching group.

The right environment

The second reason that I do not accept the benefits of learning to cope in a very large college environment is that the Sixth Form years are too important and too brief to lose time adapting to an unfamiliar and uncomfortable environment. Universities recognise that the transition to undergraduate study can be difficult, and for this reason the marks from the first year of a degree course are not considered when awarding the final grade; no such allowances are made in A Level study, and material taught in the first week can be of crucial importance in the final exams. From the first day of Lower Sixth, students have around 20 months until their first A Level exams, counting school holidays. They need to be able to learn, and feel supported, from their very first day. Not only will Rookwood Sixth Formers benefit from expert small-group teaching, from their first week we will be teaching them how to study independently, how to manage their time, so that they are ready for the next step beyond compulsory education.



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Best interests

On one further point I must be very blunt indeed: the decision made by Hampshire's state education providers to centralise and expand the size of their sixth form colleges is not an educationally driven plan, but an economic one. Post-16 state education is now funded at roughly £4000 per student, per year – this makes small-group teaching and small sixth forms simply unaffordable. A large study by South African researchers found that “larger schools start to reduce in their effectiveness as they grow much beyond 800”, and the growth of local colleges to a significantly larger size is about their survival, not their educational outcomes.



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Source: Independent Schools Council



The desired outcomes

Of course, the same arguments can be made about state vs independent education for younger year groups, which is why so many families have chosen schools like Rookwood in the first place. The logic has not changed for the sixth form years, and national data from the Independent Schools Council (ISC) are clear that there is a move towards the independent sector at this stage, rather than away: 7% of English pupils are educated in independent schools, but this rises to 12% of sixth-form-aged students. The ISC's judgement is that "parents know they get something extra in the final years", and the evidence shows that independently-educated sixth formers are more than twice as likely to attend Russell Group universities, three times as likely to gain a place at Oxford, and 10% more likely to gain a 1st or 2:1 degree, suggesting that improved preparedness for university extends well beyond simply getting the place.

Responsiveness to individual student needs

I want to argue that not only should you choose an independent school for Sixth Form, but that you should choose a small one like Rookwood. It is only in smaller environments that truly individual education can take place, giving each student the stretch, challenge and support that they need, when they need it. Removed from the need to implement economies of scale, most independent schools choose a smaller, bespoke environment for their senior students. Of The Telegraph's top 100 UK independent school sixth forms, over half have fewer than 100 students in their sixth form year groups, comparable to Rookwood's target size of roughly 70-80 students, and only three have more than 200. This allows for every step of the journey to university to be tailored to the needs of each student, from support with their UCAS application, or encouragement to read widely and develop academic curiosity, through to sensitively offered pastoral support.

We sometimes assume that older students need less support, less guidance, as they reach the final stages of their school life and develop what Dr Dominique Thompson describes in her book *How To Grow a Grown Up* as "a veneer of maturity", beneath which they continue to feel "exposed and vulnerable". At Rookwood we recognise that our Sixth Form students are ready to begin testing out their independence, and in many cases will be able to solve problems without adult intervention, but we should never assume that this is so. Sixth Form students do not need helicopter parenting, but nor do they need to be thrown in at the deep end and left to swim; my colleagues and I strive to walk a careful middle path. The Good Schools Guide echoes this advice in their guidance on choosing a sixth form destination: "It would be easy to bypass pastoral support at this higher end of adolescence, but actually this is a time when strong pastoral care can be critical. In fact, coupled with academic support, this should be one of your deciding factors."



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Teacher-student relationships

During my postgraduate study, I became an admirer of Professor John Hattie, a renowned New Zealand-based educational researcher. His landmark book *Visible Learning* examines nearly 150 different factors affecting educational outcomes, considering the significance of each factor. Some of the strongest positive effects were associated with teacher-student relationships and regular formative feedback – much easier to achieve in small groups – and with small-group learning as an inherently more effective approach. There is no secret formula; the success of small sixth forms with small class sizes is not a question of magic but of mathematics. Let us consider two students, A and B, both in Year 11 – A chooses a small independent sixth form, while B goes to a large state college. A can expect class sizes of no more than six, while B will be fortunate if their teaching groups are under 30. Now let us consider the implications. If B is lucky, then they will receive the same five hours of teaching per week that A gets – however, their teacher's time will be spread between a much larger group of students, such that our independently-educated student gets five minutes of one-to-one teaching for every minute offered to a student in the larger group. Multiplied out over the two years of study, our fortunate student receives hours upon hours of additional teaching time within timetabled lessons alone, not to mention the additional attention to marked work, the extra drafts of personal statements read by their tutor team, the additional practice interviews, and so on. At the end of the course, a student in the independent sector is significantly more likely to make an ambitious application, to be offered a place at their first-choice institution (or for the higher apprenticeship or work placement that they want) and then to achieve the grades that they need to get there.

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The Sixth Form experience at Rookwood

September 2021 will see Rookwood's first Lower Sixth cohort begin their A Level studies; an exciting time for them and for the whole Rookwood community. The opportunity to remain at Rookwood beyond Year 11 has never been available before, and whilst we know that there is very broad support for our Sixth Form, there will inevitably be some doubt from those students who would make up the first intake. It is an entirely reasonable question to ask, given the well-trodden path to local state colleges – why would I choose to stay at Rookwood?

At the core of the Rookwood Sixth Form offering is an excellent academic curriculum. Our students will receive five hours of teaching per subject per week, with expert teachers, in groups that are small and flexible enough to adapt to their needs. When I teach English Literature, I will be able to offer my students a genuinely free choice of coursework texts, knowing that I have the time for close study of each of their chosen texts, offering guidance to support their high-level analysis. In addition, all our students will receive weekly taught sessions on the study skills required for successful A Level learning – something not offered at any other institution in the area. These sessions will ensure that all students are equipped to thrive academically, and will flow smoothly into preparation for the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ), allowing all students to demonstrate intellectual curiosity and independence by completing a research project of their choice.

Enrichment and personal development

The next pillar of our provision is our extensive programme of enrichment and personal development. Our sport and physical exercise programme offers flexibility, allowing students to continue to participate in organised sport, or to coach and support younger year groups, or to go off-site to access other gyms and facilities. Our extra-curricular activities will encourage our senior students to develop their leadership skills by working with younger students, in addition to weekly Sixth-Form-only enrichment sessions covering cooking skills, budgeting and finance, consumer rights, and a whole range of other vital life skills. Finally, our General Studies sessions will cover challenging but necessary topics including relationships, consent, and substance abuse; guest speakers from a range of professional and academic backgrounds will encourage aspiration; discussion of current affairs will encourage students to be well-informed and outward-looking.

Bespoke proactive support for each student

The final strand of our Sixth Form offering is our bespoke, proactive support for each student, caring for them as individuals and guiding them towards the right destination for them. Almost from the beginning of Lower Sixth, we will be encouraging our students to explore their next steps, and I will be working closely with each student to ensure that they are well-informed and prepared for their future. With one student, that might mean guiding them towards wider and deeper academic reading, and organising a series of mock interviews to prepare them for an application to Oxford or Cambridge. With another, it might mean working with the art department to help them develop a shining portfolio or reading and re-reading letters of application for gap-year opportunities or employment. Our support will never be rote or by-the-numbers, it will always be tailored to the needs of the individual.

Rookwood is welcoming students to our Sixth Form from September 2021. To find out more, please contact Mr Dominic Simmons at: dsimmons@rookwoodschoo.org

