

Education

Ivy Ong-Wood

STUDYING IN THE UK or United States may be the aim of most Hong Kong students but which is the right fit? Education consultant Jennifer Ma Yin-wai, who co-founded Arch Academy with former banking colleague Jennifer Yu Ngar-wing, says the choice is obvious once you know the personality of the student.

If they're a generalist – flexible, open to new ideas, curious and happy to think out of the box – then the United States is the place for them. But if they're a specialist – that is, incredibly focused on one particular area – then they'll do well in Britain.

Ma studied in the UK and Yu was educated in the United States, so between them, they have experienced a wide range of educational systems, from top local and international schools to UK and US boarding schools and Oxbridge and Ivy League universities. Ma graduated from Oxford with a first-class honors in economics and management while Yu graduated *magna cum laude* from Columbia University with a degree in industrial engineering operations research.

Since Arch Academy was launched three years ago, it has grown from 14 to more than 500 students – by word of mouth alone.

The results speak for themselves, said Ma: For the academic year 2011/12, eight students secured early admissions into Ivy League colleges, 11 out of 15 received Oxbridge offers (two with scholarships) and 80 percent had London University offers.

The secret is finding the right fit. "School selection is important. Competition has gone up so much in the past few years especially from the mainland, the Middle East and India. The quantity of applications has increased but places haven't," Ma said.

She recalled advising a student who was obviously in the wrong school. "He was a talented athlete, interested in robotics and showed a lot of flexibility in class. Yet he was getting Es and Fs in school."

His parents were reluctant to move him as he was already in a top local school but were convinced after his grades went up to Bs in two years of attending skills classes at the academy, focusing on the US method of teaching. He applied for Groton School – his first choice – and got in without any problems.

Students looking for a similar success story need to know what their dream school is looking for. "The student's goal is for university but the university's goal is to prepare him for the real world and employability," Ma said. "Hence, beyond grades and school transcripts, universities are looking for students with transferable skills, or what we call the 4Cs: critical thinking, creative thinking, communication and character."

UK and US universities assess differently, she added.

In the UK, the focus is on academics and discipline-specific experience and passion because career training is part of the undergraduate training – for example, in law and medicine.

US colleges, meanwhile, go for a comprehensive analysis of profile which includes leadership, community, commitment, interesting experience, personal reflection, suitability and fit for university. Career-specific training comes only at postgraduate level.

But with so many students vying for the same places, it takes more than just identification with the university's aims to stand out.

Find the right fit



Jennifer Ma, left, and Jennifer Yu started Arch Academy three years ago.

Free forums

ARCH ACADEMY IS giving free talks to students and parents throughout this month and the next.

This month's forum by Jennifer Ma is on every Saturday and will focus on how students can learn essential skills that can be applied to the IB, HKDSE and overseas education.

There will be three forums next month:

- May 5** Boarding schools
- May 6** Key considerations for UK or US universities
- May 13** Oxford undergraduate admissions

Ma said: "The answer is preparation, which can be rephrased as awareness – awareness of options and choices available, of additional work required and of the key mentality that it's quality not quantity."

For the United States, early preparation is vital. "A lot of students cannot decide on a subject, and want to explore liberal arts, then realize they are not well prepared for their dream schools."

In the UK, it used to be that a personal statement, school recommendation and interviews (for Oxbridge) would get you through. But due to increased competition, many universities are also looking at other avenues such as entrance essays. She highlighted four areas in which the academy can guide students:

• **School selection list:** Be aware of the choices available, identify the schools that best match your preference and strengths.

• **Extracurricular activity enhancement:** How does your profile stand out? Based on your strengths and interests, how can you create a unique story to tell?

• **Essay guidance:** How you reflect upon your experience is as important as the experience itself. How can you be relevant to a particular university's culture and focus?

• **Wait-list strategies:** Don't just passively wait for an acceptance. Counselors can help you take steps to move up or off the wait list.

A final word of caution: Don't restrict yourself to traditional bastions such as Oxbridge and Durham in the UK and Ivy League universities, Stanford and MIT in the United States.

Universities which offer practical work experiences, such as York and Kent, are gaining in popularity with students hoping to secure full-time employment in a depressed economy.

Targeted degrees are also a must. Those who are looking to grab city jobs should home in on specialist schools, such as Columbia Business School, rather than go for top-ranked general universities.

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Getting that offer for Australia

LET'S IMAGINE THAT you have decided to pursue higher education in Australia, and you have a fair idea of what you would like to study and where. How should you proceed?



a Conditional Offer within 48 hours of applying, although some schools do take longer. This is very normal, and the conditions that need to be met usually involve students achieving their predicted exam grades.

Candidates can choose to accept these offers, although the UAC system does allow students to make changes to their proposed courses once they have received the Conditional Offers. For