Finding a Good Pre-sessional Programme

Pre-sessional English courses are courses designed to prepare students for studying in university degree programmes by improving their language skills and making them more familiar with the UK university environment. Most UK universities offer some kind of Pre-sessional course and their focus is almost exclusively on international postgraduates. This means that it can sometimes be difficult for students to know which course to take, particularly as the structure of these courses – and even the content – can vary quite a lot.

Usually, students will either choose or be required as a condition of acceptance to attend the Pre-sessional course run by the university where they are planning to study for their postgraduate degree. However, this is not always the case. Sometimes students will choose to study on a Pre-sessional course offered by one university, and then, afterwards, transfer to another university for their degree studies.

So what should you look for in a good Pre-sessional course?

When selecting a Pre-sessional programme, students need to consider three main things:

- A good academic English programme
- A good social programme
- A good personal care programme

Let’s look at each of these in more detail.

**A good academic English programme**

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- is a programme where the required English language entry levels are *realistic* and will ensure, as far as possible, that students reach the proficiency level they require by the end of the programme. An often cited ‘rule of thumb’ is that a student studying English full-time for 10-12 weeks can typically be expected to make a 0.5 increase in their IELTS score.

- is a programme that is well tuned to the language level of incoming students. It helps them to improve gradually, step by step, and regularly measures their progress and keeps them well informed of how they are doing and where and how they can improve.

- is a programme which meets students’ current and future language needs. In particular, it will gradually move from more general academic English to specific academic English by helping them to be more aware of the kind of language and expectations of their future academic subjects. For example, it will have students read texts, learn vocabulary, write essays and prepare presentations of the kind that will be required of them in their degree programmes and even in their professional life. It may even organise students into groups so that they are studying with other students whose future degree programmes will be in similar subject areas.
- will have a well-designed syllabus that is relevant and interesting for all students. It will be taught by teachers who are experienced and understand the language demands that university students face; teachers who understand the academic culture and are therefore well placed to guide and support students as they prepare them for their studies.

- is regularly reviewed to ensure that it is continuing to provide the best quality experience for its students. An important part of the quality assurance process is regularly collecting and carefully considering student feedback and, where necessary, responding to issues raised.

- will often allow students to join the course at different times in the year so that each individual can join the programme at the point which best reflects the language gains they will need to make in the next few weeks or months. For example, in the case of a 5-Phase pre-sessional programme, a weak student may need to do all five phases and will therefore choose their earliest possible entry point (Phase 1). A student who is somewhat stronger may need to do three or four phases, while a very strong student who has almost met their department’s English language entry requirements may only need to do Phases 4 and 5, or perhaps only Phase 5.

A good social programme
Despite its name, a pre-sessional English programme is not just about English, it is also about getting used to the UK university environment and making friends. To be successful in their studies, students need to feel integrated not isolated, and a good social programme can help them to network and to develop the language skills needed for social as well as academic purposes. Pre-sessional programmes should include a curriculum that has opportunities for social interaction built into the study programme itself and/or as day trips in the evenings or at weekends.

A good personal care programme
When students are joining an English programme focused on developing their language skills in preparation for their degree studies, it can be easy to forget that they may face many other challenges, particularly in cases where it is the first time they have been overseas. For example, a student may face culture shock and feel anxious, homesick and lonely. A good pre-sessional programme will have staff who understand and are sensitive to this and to cultural difference, along with support structures to help students who may be struggling. That support can come in one or more different forms. For example, students may have an individual tutor who will take personal responsibility for their academic and personal needs. The department may also have International Student Support Officers to help students manage any problems they may have; and if students are living in university campus accommodation there may also be Residential Tutors who they can turn to for support. Finally, these days every university has a range of student services available to pre-sessional students and normally including a confidential counselling service.

So, if you are looking for a strong Pre-sessional course, try to keep these considerations in mind. They will help you to make the right decision.

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