THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION'S SECONDARY SCHOOL EXCHANGE SCHOLARSHIP

To study in the United Kingdom

ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION

discovering voices

ESU USA

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'Since arriving at Westonbirt School, I've enjoyed every moment. It's been wonderful to experience a new culture while sharing my own here in England. The English countryside is stunning...I'm incredibly grateful for this experience and am committed to making the most of every moment.'

Aidan Anderson,
SSE Scholar 2026-27

A LIFE-CHANGING SCHOLARSHIP

The English-Speaking Union's Secondary School Exchange (SSE) is a prestigious transatlantic scholarship program offering an extraordinary gap year opportunity for young people seeking academic enrichment and cultural exchange before embarking on their university studies. Since its founding in 1928, the program has given thousands of exceptional US students the opportunity to spend an academic year or semester studying at leading independent schools in the United Kingdom, and has welcomed thousands of equally outstanding British students to do the same in the US. Scholars benefit from fully funded tuition, making this a rare opportunity to experience a world-class international education at a highly prestigious institution.

For nearly a century, the SSE has opened doors to life-changing experiences, enabling young people to immerse themselves in a new academic environment, develop lasting international friendships, and broaden their perspectives at a formative moment in their lives. Scholars return to their home countries to begin further studies at leading universities, enriched by a year that sets them apart from their peers.

More than simply a gap year or semester, the SSE is a carefully curated academic and cultural exchange. Scholars study a wide range of subjects, including many not typically available to them within their home curriculum. With university places already secured, they are able to approach their studies with greater freedom, rekindling intellectual curiosity, pursuing new interests and deepening their intellect.

Central to the experience is a distinctive approach to university-level learning which helps students to develop valuable university level skills. The British education system is renowned for its academic rigour, subject specialisation and rich educational heritage.

Over the course of its long history, the SSE has built a remarkable legacy. Alumni include generations of accomplished individuals across diverse fields, united by a shared experience that continues to shape their personal and professional lives. Their ongoing engagement as ambassadors and champions of the ESU's work reflects the lasting impact of the program and reinforces its reputation as an exceptional and enduring community. Lifelong friendships, global connections and a unique sense of belonging live on long after scholars return home.

Today, the Secondary School Exchange Scholarship stands as one of the most distinguished opportunities of its kind: a year or semester of academic enrichment, cultural discovery and personal growth that leaves an indelible mark on those selected to take part.

Find out more

'The Secondary School Exchange gave me an opportunity to meet people from completely different backgrounds; to feel a sense of independence as a young person within the structure of a very safe environment; and was one of the most exciting things I've ever done in my life.'

KT Tunstall, Musician and SSE Scholar 1992-93

Read more

‘I have made memories across the continent through being able to travel through and from the UK experiencing new countries and cultures with friends I have only just begun to know. The SSE experience has allowed me to understand myself more and grow into the person I am today.’

Adela McKinney,
SSE Scholar 2025-26

SKILLS FOR LIFE

Integrating the ESU’s SSE scholarship into a college pathway is an original and impactful way to distinguish students academically and personally. It offers a rare opportunity to experience a different education system, broaden intellectual horizons and develop the skills, confidence and perspective that colleges and future employers value highly.

ACADEMIC ENRICHMENT

An SSE scholarship allows students to study a broad range of subjects at a prestigious UK school, including courses not typically available in the US curriculum, enabling them to discover new interests and preparing them for further education. A year at a leading UK independent school offers scholars the opportunity to experience one of the world’s most respected educational traditions. Frequently set within historic campuses and beautiful grounds, these schools combine centuries of heritage with academic excellence, creating an inspiring environment in which to learn and grow.

Teaching is intellectually rigorous and encourages scholars to think critically, engage in thoughtful discussion and develop the confidence to express and defend their ideas. With small classes, expert teachers and a culture that values curiosity and academic ambition, scholars deepen their understanding of subjects they enjoy and experience new subjects and activities while broadening their perspectives before college.

PERSONAL GROWTH

Living and studying abroad requires scholars to step outside their comfort zone, adapt to new surroundings and embrace unfamiliar experiences with confidence. Through navigating a different education system, building new friendships and experiencing everyday life in another country, they develop greater independence, resilience and maturity. The experience fosters self-confidence, personal responsibility and a broader outlook on the world, equipping students with valuable life skills that will benefit them in whatever they choose to do next.

CULTURAL EXCHANGE & INTERNATIONAL FRIENDSHIP

SSE scholars experience full immersion in a UK school and community, gaining first-hand insight into a different culture and way of learning. Through daily interactions and shared experiences with British and overseas students alike, our American scholars build meaningful international friendships and develop a broader, more global perspective. These lasting connections and deep cultural understanding continue to shape their outlook long after the program ends.

WHERE COULD THE SSE TAKE YOU?

US scholars have recently studied at the following UK schools...

Dollar Academy, Scotland

‘My experience at Dollar Academy has been wonderful! My boarding house holds about 25 girls who come from all around the world. It has been great to share and discuss our different views and experiences.’

Catherine Chapel SSE Scholar 2025/26

Gresham’s School, Norfolk

‘I have left the UK with friends I have only known for one school year, but they have shown me that true friendship isn’t measured by how long you have known someone, but by the memories you make and the experiences you share together.’

Adele McKinney, SSE Scholar 2025-26

Giggleswick School, North Yorkshire

Cobham Hall, Kent

‘Cobham Hall’s campus is absolutely beautiful! I am studying politics, geography, and computer science. So far I’ve had a great time getting used to the school, getting to know everybody here, traveling around London, and just experiencing everything new.’

Joe Watkins, SSE Scholar 2026-27

Langley School, Norfolk

Wells Cathedral School, Somerset

Eastbourne College, Eastbourne

Our recent SSE scholars have come from the following US schools...

- Culver Academies, Indiana
- Western Reserve Academy, Ohio
- Ethel Walker School, Connecticut
- Westminster School, Connecticut
- The Governor’s Academy, Massachusetts
- Mercersburg Academy, Pennsylvania
- Asheville School, North Carolina

YOUR SSE JOURNEY STARTS HERE

SEPTEMBER
- Online applications open

OCTOBER/NOVEMBER
- Parent & student ESU SSE online information evening

DECEMBER
- Applications close

JANUARY
- Regional interviews (in person or via Zoom)

FEBRUARY
- Finalists matched with a prospective UK host school

MARCH/APRIL
- ESU notifies successful candidates of their proposed UK host school & candidates have an online interview with the school
- Scholarship offer

APRIL/MAY
- Complete UK school online forms/application & apply for UK Student Visa

SUMMER
- Pre-departure orientation

AUGUST/SEPTEMBER
- US Scholars depart for the UK

Exact program dates and key deadlines vary each year and will be shared well in advance directly with participating US schools. Students should speak to their teacher/s for the specific dates that apply to their program cycle. Please note, UK terms often start in mid September.

HOW TO APPLY

Applications are accepted via an online application form. The ESU will provide a link to this form and full details to the relevant teacher/member of staff in each host school, who will distribute the application form and guidance to any interested students. The application form will require:

- Some personal details about the student and what they study
- A personal statement (no longer than 400 words)
- Parental consent
- Reference from a teacher
- Academic transcripts
- Medical history

Please reach out to sse@esuus.org or auhl@esuus.org if you have any questions.

ELIGIBILITY

The ESU SSE Scholarship is open to high school seniors for the gap year immediately following graduation. Students must have already been accepted to a US college and defer their attendance. SSE candidates must be US citizens and demonstrate strong scholastic achievement, extra-curricular participation, leadership and personal character. If offered an ESU SSE Scholarship to a UK boarding school, the student must accept the place.

THE SCHOLARSHIP AND ADDITIONAL COSTS

Each scholarship covers the cost of board and tuition at a private high school. Scholars are fully-fledged students at their host school for the duration of their stay, with access to all the school's facilities and activities.

However, scholars are responsible for all additional costs including travel to and from the UK, health and travel insurance, sports uniform and books. These costs depend on several factors such as where the host school is situated, how much additional travelling the scholar does and how they spend their free time.

The ESU offers means-tested financial assistance, for which scholars can apply. These grants are given to support scholars with the additional costs of the program, but they are limited. Many scholars use the summer holidays to save money for their time in the UK, and most rely on financial support from their family.

AN EXTRAORDINARY NETWORK

Our SSE scholars form a distinguished community of alumni defined by ambition, creativity and influence, following in the footsteps of individuals who have gone on to succeed in an incredible range of fields. This network includes figures such as folk singer-songwriter Pete Seeger, Vermont governor and presidential candidate Howard Dean, and *New York Times* White House correspondent and London bureau chief, Robert Semple.

Logan Glass, Cobham Hall, 2025-26

I was given the incredible opportunity through the English-Speaking Union to attend a secondary boarding school in the United Kingdom. From the time the application process began until my flight back home, the ESU USA and ESU UK offices have been nothing but helpful and supportive. When I was assigned to Cobham Hall, I was overjoyed. It is a beautiful Grade I listed manor house, only 30 minutes away from central London. Being only 30 minutes away from London was like being handed the key to Europe, giving me the opportunity to experience new cultures and perspectives that I might have otherwise missed.

Upon arrival, I quickly felt welcome at this very international boarding school. I shared my boarding experience with fellow students from the UK, Russia, Moldova, Iran, Turkey, Thailand, China, Japan, Ukraine, Peru, Italy and many other countries. Being immersed in an environment with so many different cultures has taught me so much more than I ever would have learned in a classroom. Talking to fellow students during meals, in the boarding house or while studying together has provided opportunities to learn about different cultures. Learning about how people from all over the world view their lives, their education and their futures has provided me with a broader view of the world. I have learned to appreciate the importance of international friendships.

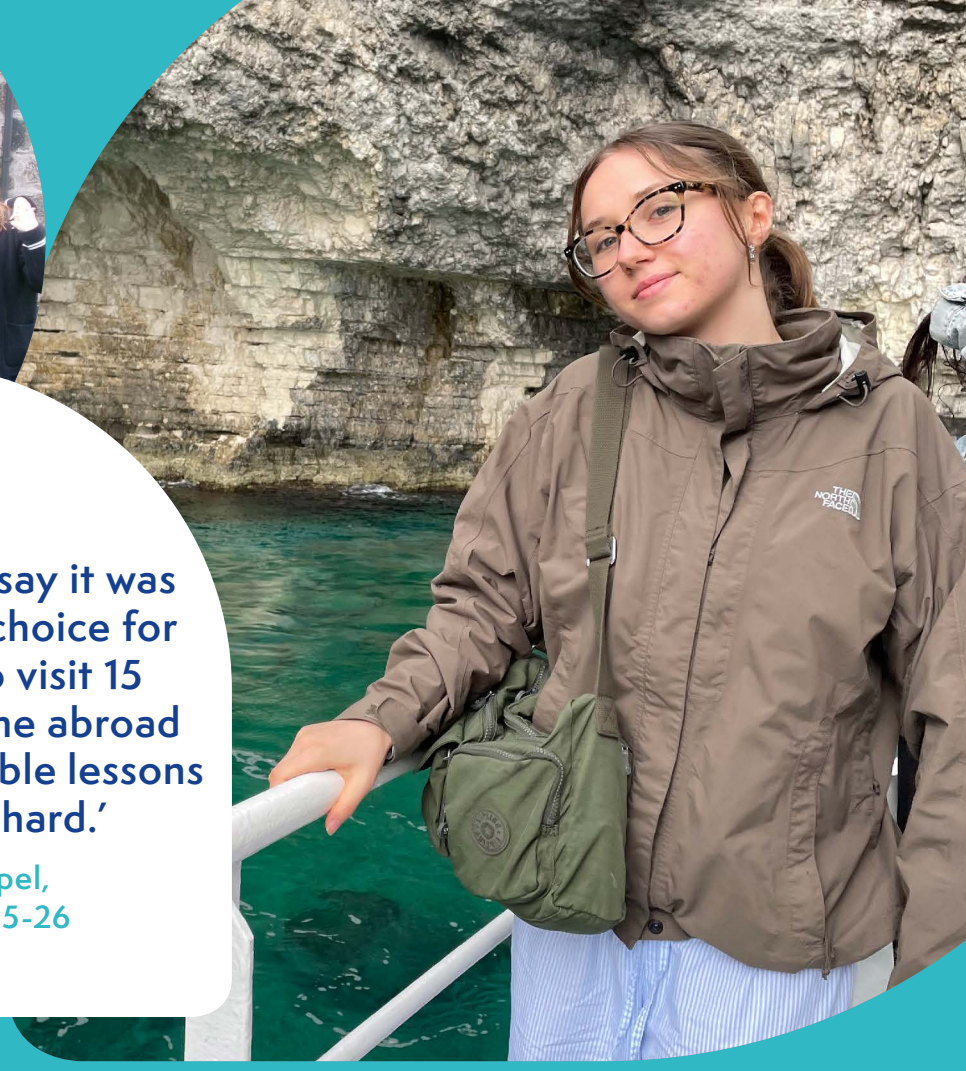
When the day students arrived on the first day of school, it was certainly a culture shock. Being the only student with an American accent in the school was a new experience and it took me some time to adjust to the differences between British and American school culture. However, I did not take too long to jump right into things. Although I was not officially enrolled in any courses for credit, I did attend classes for the sake of fully immersing myself in British school culture. Although technically the students in my classes were younger than me (as Year 13 is for exams), I quickly made friends and got very involved.

Out of the classroom, I seized as many opportunities as I could. I was in the Model UN debating club, the choir, a Wellbeing Ambassador and a guide, helping with tours and open Mornings. These activities not only enabled me to meet my peers but also to give back to my community. Being able to represent my school to new students and visitors was particularly special, as I was able to give my perspective as an international student while also learning the art of communicating the special character of Cobham Hall.

Another thing that Cobham offered me was an incredible amount of flexibility and freedom, and I was able to take advantage of this opportunity by exploring beyond the classroom. In one of the half-term breaks, I embarked on my first major trip. I backpacked throughout Italy with another SSE scholar, who was attending Gresham's School in Norfolk. After this experience, we decided to go our separate ways and try traveling on our own, which was exciting and terrifying at the same time. I went to Munich, Germany and Amsterdam in the Netherlands before returning to London. Knowing I am able to explore new places and experience different cultures on my own has opened a huge door of opportunity for me.

At the end of the year, I had visited 14 different countries, including Italy, Vatican City, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Belgium, France, Finland, Denmark, Scotland, Norway, Wales, Sweden and, of course, England. While traveling on my own, I had to step outside my comfort zone, which, I must say, has allowed me to grow as a person in a big way. I also met amazing people from all around Europe. Cobham has provided me with the perfect blend of the British school experience and the freedom to travel and learn in a way that could never be replicated in a classroom setting. It is because of the ESU Secondary School Exchange Program that I have had the gap year of a lifetime and I am grateful for the opportunity.

'It is because of the ESU Secondary School Exchange Program that I have had the gap year of a lifetime'



‘I can confidently say it was the best possible choice for me. I was able to visit 15 countries in my time abroad and learned invaluable lessons both easy and hard.’

Catherine Chapel,
SSE Scholar 2025-26

The English-Speaking Union of the United States is an educational, non-profit organization with an international and national network of more than 60 Branches, whose members are committed to celebrating English as a shared language to foster global understanding and good will by providing educational and cultural opportunities for students, educators and members.

The ESU’s mission is to equip people with the communication and critical thinking skills they need to thrive and build a more collaborative world. Through our delivery of oracy training workshops for teachers and students, and through our globally renowned national and international public speaking, debating and Shakespeare competitions, we reach over 100,000 young people each year.

By helping these young people to discover their voices and the agency they can have, we are shaping a world where individuals, communities and ultimately nations can engage via civil, reasoned debate and work together to address our shared challenges. The ESU and our work are needed today more than ever.

We build relationships that last a lifetime, sustained by a vibrant alumni network full of lifelong supporters who return as passionate judges, generous donors, and committed advocates for our work.

The Secondary School Exchange is one of the ESU’s longest-standing and most prestigious programs, offering students the chance to experience academic excellence, cultural immersion and personal growth through a year studying in the United Kingdom.

By taking part, scholars join a global community of ESU alumni whose experiences continue to shape their education, careers and outlook long after their exchange year ends.

ESU USA

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