

Mariia Muntian, Ukraine, Benenden school for girls

'Not better or worse but different' Is this your experience of education in a British boarding school?

Boarding school. Mine was full of teenage girls bouncing around and bursting with energy. It was strange to realise that you had to share your space with 50 other people like these.

At first, I felt like I was a bit different from everyone else in there. My experiences, cultural and financial background have made me that way. I could not help but notice the contrast between us. You are going to the Maldives with your family for the half term break? I am returning to my guardians without having the opportunity to even see my family live.

But what if I turn it around? We are very much alike. In reality, we are all human beings. People with similar longings, hopes and interests. Boarding school practically never stops. Even in the late evening, when the classes and extras are all done and your homework is finishes, you are constantly bumping into people and chatting with them. And there you are. Bouncing around and bursting with energy just like everyone else. Or you feel deadly tired. Just like everyone else. Class is over - and what do you do? Rest - like I used to? Activities, my dear! The number of different clubs you go to sometimes drives you crazy. Dance, art, drama, music, badminton, EDI committee, volunteering, STEM, PRISM, book club... After starting my own club with a few friends, I was genuinely sleep deprived.

But what if that is only half the truth? Let us flip it again. Let us say that you ARE different. But not just different. You are exciting. Interesting. Special in your own way. Your experiences, cultural and financial background have made you that way. I am glad that I managed to start my Ukrainian company. My baby. It is getting stronger every day. Yesterday it started walking! How, you ask. The key, my dear friend, is proper nutrition.

I think we are the only ones who have two branches - one for the students and one for the staff. It's still a bit awkward when our headmistress comes to our meetings, but we are getting used to it. Every day we pass on a bit of our knowledge about Ukrainian culture to everyone in the school. When we cooked varenyky at one of our meetings in my boarding house, everyone absolutely loved it! Some even helped with the cooking and cleaning up. I am very grateful for everyone who is open to learning new things about my culture and asking questions. It is an incomparable feeling to sit in the dining room with my friends and hear people talking about my country. What makes me different from everyone else here has not stopped me from sharing my otherness - no, rather my specialness - and making new contacts and friends.

Nor has it stopped me from learning from others. From chocolate brownies - which I absolutely love - to celebrating the late Queen's Jubilee and getting accidentally drunk, to diving into The Crown series and the comedies of Jack Whitehall, to playing squash and eating fish and crisps, to trick or treating on Halloween, to writing Christmas cards, to wearing crowns on Christmas Eve and eating pigs in blankets.

Being different does not mean better. Nor does it mean worse. It simply means being different, which you can turn into being special. Into being interesting. Into being exciting. Into being an explorer. And the things you can achieve with this mindset in this wonderful place are countless.

I declare that this essay is entirely written by me and only me.