

MEP Programme FAQs



What exactly is the Mandarin Excellence Programme?

The MEP is an intensive language programme which will see at least 5,000 school pupils in England on track to fluency in Mandarin Chinese by 2020. It's funded by the Department for Education and delivered by UCL Institute of Education in partnership with the British Council.

How does it work?

Beginning in Year 7, selected pupils take eight hours of Mandarin every week, including four hours of classroom-taught lessons, to ensure that they're on track towards fluency.

Isn't eight hours of Mandarin per week stressful for pupils?

This is an intensive language programme and it isn't suitable for everyone. Schools take this into account when selecting pupils to participate, and also provide appropriate guidance and support to help them manage their work.

Why is the government encouraging schools to teach Mandarin?

Languages are crucial for work and life in the global race. China is recognised as the world's second biggest economy, so it's vital that more young people leave school with a good grasp of Mandarin.

What are the benefits for pupils on the MEP?

British Council research has highlighted Mandarin as one of the most important languages for the UK's prosperity over the next twenty years. The ability to speak Mandarin is an incredibly useful asset for pupils, both professionally and personally. It will give them a competitive edge in an increasingly connected world, enabling them to explore and engage with China, its culture and economy.

Isn't Mandarin a difficult language to learn?

Mandarin is a fascinating and rewarding language to learn and not necessarily more difficult to get to grips with when compared to other languages. In fact, some things are actually simpler – for example, unlike in French, there is no conjugation of verbs.

What can pupils do with their Mandarin skills in the future?

Pupils will be encouraged to continue learning Mandarin. UCL Institute of Education and the British Council are engaging with universities to ensure that there are relevant opportunities for those on the programme to advance their skills beyond school.

How long has Finham Park School been running the programme?

Finham Park School's first cohort of MEP students started in 2016, during the first year of the programme. This year we have classes from Y7 through to Y10. We are now an experienced MEP school and we make regular contributions to the development of the programme through the Head Teachers' Steering Group and regular teacher meetings run by the programme organisers in London.

How can we be sure the programme is effective?

MEP students sit a series of summer exams each year called the Hurdle Tests to measure progress, but also the schools in our MEP group are visited regularly by the MEP Programme Co-ordinator. In

addition, this year were visited by an independent educational researcher from Research Stories, who was very impressed with the teaching and progress made by the students.

How can I support my child at home when I don't know any Mandarin?

Mainly by encouraging your child to show off their new found skills! Students are well-supported with their independent studies. School pays for each student to have their own account with Go Chinese, an online learning platform which provides reading and listening exercises to do at home. Students and parents are also invited to join a class on Edmodo, a free online learning platform where students can access links helpful activities and type messages to other students. Handwriting and speaking are further developed through the use of character grids and sentence builder grids.

How do you sustain children's interest in such a long, challenging course?

The programme provides extra funding in Y7 to ensure students have regular Off Curriculum Days to study Chinese language and culture in more depth. For example, students may study Calligraphy, Chinese Brush Painting, Chinese Dance, Taiji Fan performances and many other exciting activities.

In Y8 students have the opportunity to take part in a two-week Intensive Learning Trip to China – in 2018 students went to Chengdu, and in 2019 to Shanghai.

In Y9, students take part in a 4-day UK residential (so far based at Nottingham University) with a focus on advertising the UK as a tourist destination for Chinese people. During the trip, they work in groups to develop advertising materials about their home town, then pitch these to a panel of experts! They also get to meet Chinese-speaking business people selling to the Chinese market.

Will my child have to go to China?

We encourage all our MEP students to take part in the MEP Intensive learning trip to China, which so far has taken place in Y8. It is a very important part of the programme and most students go unless there is a serious medical reason not to. The trip is heavily subsidised by the programme, and school usually contributes further funds to make it accessible to all families. Students make great strides, not only in their language learning but also in their development as young adults. Sadly, in view of the pandemic, this year's trip had to be cancelled.

How many places are available each year at Finham Park School and how do you decide who gets them?

We only have 30 places available each year, so we usually like to give students a taster lesson (not possible this year) and gather some information about their ability to work independently, copy characters accurately etc. It is very important that children are highly motivated, so we ask them to reflect on why they want to do the course. We are looking for proactive, resilient, hard-working students who will get along well with their peer group and appreciate the privilege of taking part in the programme. Your child may not have all these qualities at the outset, but they will certainly be asked to develop them from day one of their studies.

What if my child changes their mind about doing the programme?

We keep a close eye on progress during the first half term and will do our best to provide French as an alternative if your child is not thriving on the programme. Spanish is a little more challenging to arrange as it involves a move to the other side of the year group, and classes may already be full. After that point, in keeping with MFL department policy, we expect all children to continue with their chosen language to GCSE.