



# British independents continue international development

*Richard Gaskell* is the schools director at ISC Research, which supplies impartial data, intelligence and research expertise on the world's international schools market. Here, he tells us what UK schools must consider when planning to open a school overseas.

The number of British independent schools establishing campuses overseas continues to expand. These schools are responding to the growing demand for academically excellent, English language education, offering the university and career potential that reputable independent school brands can deliver.

It is a demand that is spreading globally, particularly throughout Asia, as wealthy, aspirational parents become aware of the range of schooling opportunities available to their children close to home; that do not require foreign boarding. This academic year began with an all-time high of new British independent schools opening abroad.

14 new international independent schools, originating from the UK, have welcomed their first pupils this September. They are located in cities where demand for the best of British education is particularly high.

Amongst these are several new sister schools for British independents that are already established internationally, including four schools directly associated with Wellington College in China and Thailand. They join three other China-based schools within the Wellington International School portfolio. A new Brighton College school also opened in the United Arab Emirates, taking the international offering by Brighton College to four schools. Malvern College Hong Kong, which opened this September, will sit alongside Malvern Colleges Qingdao, Chengdu and Egypt. There were two new openings for Shrewsbury School; a new city-centre primary campus in Bangkok to add to Shrewsbury's existing Bangkok Riverside School, plus a brand new school in Hong Kong.

For some of the other independent schools that opened in September, this is their first foray into international territory. King's College School Wimbledon, for example, opened two schools in China, Sedbergh School opened its first sister school in China, so too did Scotland's Merchiston Castle School and Welsh independent, Christ College Brecon welcomed pupils for the first time to its new King Henry VIII School in Malaysia.



## Inspiring international development

The motivations and benefits of international development vary for every school; from expanding educational opportunities and generating income streams, to strengthening the school brand. The impetus behind the new Merchiston International School, for example, came from a former parent who wanted to establish an international school in his home town of Shenzhen, drawing on the brand values that he considered had so benefitted his own son. Headmaster of Merchiston Castle School in Edinburgh, Andrew Hunter, explained the impact of the new school in China: "It is allowing pupils in Shenzhen to learn in a way that complements all that is admired in the Chinese curriculum and provides a world-wide educational passport.

"We believe that the pupils of Merchiston International School, Shenzhen, will have the determination, passion, life-skills and the right qualifications to contribute to the amazing growth that Shenzhen enjoys, and that these pupils will have a truly global outlook on life". ●►

▲ Wellington's Huili School Hangzhou



Andrew explained the impact of moving into the international arena with a co-educational school that will eventually educate 1,200 predominantly Chinese pupils, including 600 boarders: "It generates important income to improve facilities at the home school and offers more means-tested bursaries to pupils who would otherwise be unable to attend Merchiston, and, as an educationalist, it gives me enormous pleasure to be part of a project that expands an educational philosophy I have spent a lifetime practising: educating children to allow them to be the very best they can possibly be".

### Leading the international independent brand sector

British independent schools currently dominate the independent brand sector of the international schools market. As the 2017-2018 academic year ended, ISC Research reported that 57 British independent schools were educating 35,796 children aged between three and 18 outside the UK. Between them, these schools generated USD \$833.5 million from fees alone, some of which was dispersed back to the mother school.

Although a few US and Australian independent schools are established overseas, their peers have been slow to respond to foreign development opportunities. Even with five new independent schools from the US opening internationally this year, the combined total of US and Australian independent schools abroad stands at just 10; a far cry from Britain's current total of 72. Demand for these schools does exist, but the desire for a British education remains the greatest choice around the world. Of the 9,605 English-medium international schools worldwide (the independent school brands being a small sector of this), 37 percent follow a British curriculum and many parents seek schools with a British orientation, British examinations and British teachers.

### Preparing for international development

A high level of investment interest in international education now exists in many countries; a trend expected to continue as more parents choose international schooling in preference to their local state schools. It's particularly prevalent in countries with strengthening economies in South East Asia and in China, where government regulations have opened up more opportunities for the development of international education. This year, new investment partnerships have been agreed with several British independent schools including Durham School, Adcote School, Wycombe Abbey and Uppingham School.

The process necessary to achieve an investor partnership agreement is challenging, particularly so in China which is attracting the most development interest now. "Of all the countries in which to open a school, China must be one of the most complex", said Patrick Mulvihill, development director at Uppingham School, which will be opening a school in Chongqing in September 2019. "The regulatory framework is multi-layered and yet, despite the often black and white statements detailing what is and what is not permissible, some degree of grey still exists", he explained. "The potential

difficulties faced by foreign schools are many and varied, though the market in China has huge potential and growth forecasts are on an increasingly upward curve", he added.

Patrick urged other development directors and bursars to seek expertise at the earliest stage and through every step of the process. "Any school looking to open an outpost and benefit from the burgeoning market for an international style education needs to be fully versed on what it takes to successfully traverse the legal systems, geographical variations and demographic differences within the country", he said.

Helen Kavanagh, who has led the international development of Wellington College, agrees: "Be absolutely prepared at every stage of the process", she said. "Getting approvals is one of the major challenges and it helps if you have the right partners. You have to produce a good technical bid, a good educational bid and make sure the authorities can see the type of education that you want to offer. If you promise something and it's not actually who you are, it's going to fail. If you think you've explained who you are and they've misunderstood, there will probably be problems further down the line. So, it's about having clarity of who you are, what you stand for and what you are going to deliver".

She added that achieving governing body support is also a challenging part of the process in the earliest stage: "Even when you know a region, if you're planning to start up a new school, your governors will be nervous and they will want reassurance. They will want to know what the economy's like, where demand lies, etc. I've got to convince everyone around the table, who are all leaders of industry, so they're going to ask probing questions. It's important to have as much information as I can".

Regardless of the number of success stories, there are abandoned projects and disasters too, most often due to lack of preparation, resources or commitment allocated by the home school. Expert partners are essential for every aspect of the process and journey to international development. No one expert can meet all the needs of a school's international development project as everything from legal representation, to market research, business planning, recruitment, benchmarking and curriculum mapping will require skilled support and an understanding from the context of the development location. However, expertise is accessible and options are wide-ranging, depending on the needs and aspirations of every school, and it's far from too late; there remains a world of opportunities for British independent schools considering international potential. ◀●



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