



New departures

UK schools are branching out overseas at an ever-faster rate. Steve Wright charts their progress – and asks two pioneering schools for some pointers

ABOVE: Merchiston International School, Shenzhen
BELOW RIGHT: Malvern College Egypt

One of the major developments in the UK independent education landscape over the past decade has been the increasing number of schools opening sister operations overseas. According to findings by ISC Research, there are now more than four and a half million pupils studying at more than 8,000 English-language international schools around the world. Of those schools, more than 3,700 are ‘British’ schools – schools with a British national orientation, and/or using elements of the UK national curriculum.

As specialists in immigration law, the international law firm Fragomen has advised UK schools on their overseas expansion plans – and are well-placed to observe the growth in overseas expansion, and what is fuelling it. “A British education is renowned worldwide for its high quality and standards,” explains Fragomen solicitor, Naomi Goldshtein. “Demand for places in the top schools remains high.

“The boom in British institutions opening ‘sister schools’ overseas has been fuelled by demand from British expat communities as well as by local families looking for a British education for their children. It’s a creative step, allowing UK institutions to expand globally while giving parents the option for their children to be educated

locally, in an international learning environment.”

So, how do schools begin the process of developing overseas branch schools? ISC Research is the leading provider of English-medium international school intelligence, trends and data. The company can provide schools looking to expand overseas with the latest market intelligence, data, benchmarking and research partnerships to help them with their new venture.

Expansion can be achieved in several ways, as Nalini Cook, Business Development Manager at ISC Research, explains: “Most overseas expansions are brand-new school developments, built as sister schools that partner with a local investor and share the same brand name, style, ethos and learning approach as the mothership. Other independent schools provide management services, teaching and learning partnerships, and brand integrity to international schools.” →





Regulations and protocols vary, of course, from nation to nation. In order to open a school in the United Arab Emirates, for example, the investor will need to obtain approval from that country's Ministry of Education. Furthermore, individual Emirates may impose additional requirements for setting up schools and educational institutes, and these will be overseen by Emirate-specific authorities, with local variations. For example, Dubai's Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) is responsible for issuing Educational Services Permits (ESP) that allow schools to operate in the city. Depending on the jurisdiction in which the school is being set up, various approvals will be required, including health and safety authority certificate, municipality or free zone authority approvals and more.

HELP IS AT HAND

Alongside the advice given by ISC Research, schools looking overseas will also find the Council of British International Schools (COBIS) a helpful ally. Numbering over 500 member organisations, COBIS represents member schools with the British Government, educational bodies and the corporate sector; provides effective professional development for senior leaders,





ABOVE: Malvern College Qingdao, China

LEFT: Science at Malvern College Chengdu

governors, teachers and support staff; and promotes child protection, safer recruitment and employment practices.

COBIS' services also include the Patron's Accreditation and Compliance, a system of quality assurance for member schools. The scheme supports British schools overseas on their development journey and actively supports whole-school improvement ensuring the best possible educational environments for children and young people worldwide. By 2022, all COBIS member schools will have been through this scheme and, as of 2017, schools had to meet the scheme's high standards in order to become a COBIS school.

Merchiston Castle School opened its overseas campus in Shenzhen, China for the start of the 2017–18 academic year, a co-educational school, in contrast to the boys-only parent school in Edinburgh. In Merchiston's case, the move had been some time in the planning. "At the time of his appointment in 1998, the then Headmaster, Andrew Hunter, told his interview panel that British education growth opportunities lay in overseas expansion," explains the school's Director of Development, David Rider. "For Merchiston, this was a strategy that took the school 20 years to deliver successfully."

The inaugural academic year at Merchiston

Shenzhen is going well. "The school opened with 185 students – and by the end of this academic year we expect to be teaching 400 boys and girls from ages five to 18," David explains. The school is now exploring the possibility of opening further schools across China and possibly into the USA.

“A British education is renowned worldwide for its high quality and standards”

Any advice to other schools contemplating their own overseas expansion? "When things don't seem to be going to plan, check what has been translated: 99 times out of 100 that's where the misunderstanding will be," is David's succinct advice. "We also carried out a great deal of advice and deliberation over how to protect our brand identity, and how to best structure the transaction in order to ensure minimum disruption to the home school."

In what ways does the new school differ from, or resemble, the parent school back in Scotland? "We have →



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endeavoured to replicate all aspects of life at our ‘home’ school. The only modifications have been made to allow for the co-educational pupil base.”

EXPAND YOUR HORIZONS

Elsewhere, Malvern College now has considerable experience in opening sister schools overseas, with no fewer than four sister schools – in Hong Kong, Cairo, and Qingdao and Chengdu, both China – alongside its base in Worcestershire. Its first international campus, in Qingdao, opened in September 2012.

“Malvern first started looking to expand overseas around 10 years ago as a key component of our long-term development strategy,” explains Allan Walker, the college’s Director of International Schools. And was this a difficult decision to make? “Whilst there will always be differing voices and opinions on any governing body, we were very fortunate in having a very strong and commercially astute Chairman at the time, Lord MacLaurin (former Chairman of Tesco and Vodafone), who was instrumental in moving this decision forward. In terms of the decision itself, Malvern has always been a forward-looking, entrepreneurial school (our motto, *Sapiens Qui Prospicit*, means ‘Wise is the person who looks ahead’). Conceptually, and culturally, this did not feel like a difficult decision for us.”

The international expansion programme

has, says Allan, succeeded beyond expectations. “This is thanks, again, to strong leadership at management and governing body level, and to a very strong partner in Babylon Education, our East Asian operating partners. We believe that in opening Malvern College Hong Kong, our fifth campus, in September 2018, we became the fastest-growing Headmasters’ and Headmistresses’ Conference (HMC) school group overseas, with five new schools in six years. Other milestones include opening the first HMC overseas branded campus in Africa. We currently educate 1,300 pupils overseas and there are a total of over 2,000 pupils in the Malvern family altogether, including Malvern College UK and The Downs Malvern, our associated prep school.

It has, in short, been a very busy few years for the Malvern College family. So, what’s next: any further international expansion plans in the pipeline? “Our next project is to open an all-through school on a new-build campus in Chengdu, on a separate site to the existing secondary school. The new campus was launched earlier in the autumn and will ultimately have a capacity of up to 2,000. This site will open in stages from September 2019. We are also working on other projects both in East Asia and elsewhere in the world and hope to be able to announce further development over the course of the next few months. ■

Contacts

ISC Research www.iscresearch.com

COBIS www.cobis.org.uk

Merchiston International, Shenzhen
www.merchiston.co.uk/community/mcis-shenzhen

Malvern College International
www.malverncollegeinternational.org

Taking the leap?

What advice can Malvern College’s Director of International Schools, Allan Walker, offer to other schools looking abroad for their next move?

1 Take time to choose and get to know your overseas partners carefully. With a for-profit business model like this, it is essential that both parties share a long-term vision for the school.

2 Understanding your brand identity clearly and being able to articulate this is really important – particularly once you have more than one school overseas, as consistency of branding then becomes more important.

3 Ensure you are clear about the entry model you want to use (direct investment, franchise or other) and the implications that this decision will have in terms of your school’s risk profile and the balance between risk and reward.

4 Be clear about the control mechanisms you want to have in place. For example: who chooses the Headmaster and to whom should he/she report? How many seats will there be on the board?

5 Consider your exit strategy and triggers, and ensure these are clearly articulated in your contract paperwork.

6 Choose sensible lawyers who know their stuff – but are also prepared to be flexible and pragmatic.

7 Finally, always allow more time than you think you need for project development. Everything takes longer than you expect – particularly first time round.