

INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION AND THE WAVE OF CHANGE

These days many independent schools keenly focus on their internationalism, with their claims to “educate the leaders of tomorrow’s world”, “create responsible global citizens” or “foster international understanding”, but what advantages do they really have over local schooling? Richard McDonald, Head Master of Aiglon College in Switzerland, examines the changing nature of an increasingly popular choice for parents across the globe.

In the last century, sending your child to an international school was a choice made because you lived in a foreign country where schooling options were limited, or you were actively seeking this unique form of education for your children, and, in the case of UK independent schools, many wealthy international families were attracted to the prestige conferred by a British education. Now, it seems, in the 21st century, international schools are at the forefront of the schooling debate, especially amongst those keen to give their children the best possible access and opportunities in an increasingly interconnected world.

Yet the early pioneers in international schooling were seen as somewhat quirky: Kurt Hahn, German founder of Gordonstoun in Scotland, (a favourite choice of the British Royal family including Prince Philip and Prince Charles) was a tireless advocate of a

holistic approach that emphasised pupils’ personal challenge and service to others. Indeed, the early architects of the International Baccalaureate (IB), a qualification so renowned and respected today, were considered by many to be barking up the wrong tree.

The public’s awareness of international schools has increased dramatically in the last two decades and the dynamics of international education have also greatly changed. What might have been quirky before is now defining major change. Few major cities on any continent are without one or more international schools and increasing competition, demand, funding combined with the rigour of international accrediting agencies such as the Council of International Schools means that these schools are leaders in terms of educational innovation, facilities and – perhaps most importantly – educational relevance for the world of



tomorrow. In fact, in one generation, the IB has gone from being the eccentric qualification of an exotic few to the must-have secondary qualification for the internationally minded.

A small group of some of the best known international boarding schools lie in Europe, with a concentration of them here in Switzerland. Long-gone are the prim finishing institutions, but in their place are top notch schools in stunning locations that have an established tradition of blending a forward-thinking outlook with a challenging holistic international curriculum, including sports, creative and performance arts and outdoor challenges to provide unprecedented opportunities for children to grow up in a diverse environment and to establish key networks. For example, in the case of many parents in the UK, these European schools are even closer in travel terms to London than many provincial schools in Britain.

So is the fuss (and cost) of international schools worth it? If you believe that international perspectives, networks, friendships and partnerships are going to impact your child's life in the future, then yes, as every day, we witness the globe becoming ever more connected. The diversity of schools on offer is considerable, and there is no substitute for a personal visit to schools to convince

yourself, or your child, one way or the other. And even the cost issue of an international boarding school may be mitigated, since a few schools offer scholarships for highly talented and motivated students.

This evolving focus on international education is not a minor shift: it appears to be a growing wave of change. Soon, instead of the question "why choose an international school?" many parents may find themselves asking "why on earth choose a local school?" ●

Richard McDonald has been Head Master of Aiglon College since 2009 (and previously 1994-2000). He served from 2006-2010 as the Chair of the Swiss Group of International Schools and serves regularly as a visiting Chair of Accreditation worldwide for the Council of International Schools.

