

ISB: Nurturing future leaders through personalised education



Immersed in Brussels' picturesque Forêt de Soignes and just a stone's throw from a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the International School of Brussels (ISB), renowned for its unique approach to learning, offers a rich academic programme, complete with a history steeped in principles for the formation of the global citizens of tomorrow.

The Brussels Times sat down with ISB school director James MacDonald at his office in the impressive Château des Fougères. From his window, MacDonald can observe children of all ages and nationalities playing and learning across the school's 40-acre campus. Walking from his office into school buildings, he enthusiastically recounts the names of students and their academic interests.

At the core of ISB's philosophy, MacDonald glows, is a commitment to the holistic development of its students. While many private schools focus their resources on nurturing only the brightest students, ISB believes in a tailored approach of fostering academic curiosity persistently across all its students, from preschool through to high school.

"We use academics as a metric for success but we don't use that exclusively... we're looking much more holistically. We see students as individuals. We focus on something called personalisation," he said. This ethos permeates every aspect of ISB, where students are not just learners but explorers, creators, and innovators.

Personalisation: the ISB way

Personalisation is not just a buzzword at ISB; it's a practised reality. "What really sets us apart is the individual experience each child has here... we have considerable evidence that we do [personalisation] in a different way, in a better way, than many other places." Each student's journey is tailored to their strengths, interests, and aspirations, ensuring that they are not just part of a system, but a system is built around them. This approach fosters a sense of belonging and purpose, essential ingredients for successful learning.

In practice, this starts with a conversation. During the onboarding procedure, students are encouraged to pursue their own strengths, both in the classroom and beyond, such as in the arts or on the sports fields. "This is a real personalised approach. We ask: What are you interested in? What would light your fire? What would you be excited about?" MacDonald explained.

This approach has consistently delivered results. ISB's class of 2023 achieved a staggering 73 offers to Russell Group universities in the United Kingdom including Oxford, as well as \$2.5 million in scholarships. Students equally gained places at prestigious US universities including Stanford.

The academic offering at ISB is as diverse as its student body. ISB combines the best of international curricula to ensure its students can integrate into further education, no matter how long they study at ISB. Furthermore, with about 17 different languages taught, including a full-blown bilingual programme, the ISB community is a celebration of different cultures and ideas. "We have this unique blend of high inclusion

and high academics... we look at each student as an independent learner," MacDonald said.

Programmes like 'Pathways to Excellence', which offer specialised pathways in athletics, arts, and STEM, cater to students' unique interests and talents, preparing them for a world that values expertise.

ISB prides itself on having some of the most dedicated and skilled teachers. Over 200 highly qualified and international teaching staff cater to student needs and encourage an inquisitive approach to learning, often beyond school hours. These educators are not just conveyors of knowledge but mentors who guide, inspire, and challenge students to reach their full potential.

Inclusion and diversity: a way of life

Inclusion, MacDonald stresses, is part of the founding ethos at ISB. The school embraces a wide spectrum of learners, ensuring that each one finds success in their own way. "We're not being narrow in terms of what types of students we might want here... everyone's successful. We don't have a predetermined pathway that decides you're successful".

This inclusive approach reflects in the school's vibrant community, where differences are celebrated and seen as strengths. ISB has an array of learning support programmes to help foster the talent of disadvantaged students.

While other schools focus their attention on the attainment of the top 20 percent of students, ISB prides itself on also boosting students with physical or learning disabilities. "Learners experience inclusion when they authentically belong to a community that values them as unique human beings with inherent worth," ISB believes. Thanks to the support of specialised teaching staff, many of these students have secured positions in prestigious vocational education programmes.

ISB understands that education is not confined to the four walls of a classroom. Extra-



curricular activities are a significant part of the school's ethos. From arts to athletics, students are encouraged to explore their passions, fostering a love for learning that transcends traditional academic pursuits.

Deep roots

ISB's roots strike deep in Brussels. Founded in 1951, ISB started as a small school catering to the needs of American families in Brussels. Over the years, it has evolved into a prestigious institution, mirroring the dynamic and diverse spirit of Brussels itself. As both a not-for-profit and a community-run school, ISB strives to engage with the community and equip students with values for the 21st century.

These values are evident in the school's various initiatives, from community service projects to global outreach programmes, nurturing responsible global citizens. ISB works with 25 local partners to engage with the community, and students have volunteered more than 5,000 hours of their time towards social projects.

"Being a not-for-profit and a community school, our governance structure is derived from the community... We have this nice connection between the community and its well-being," MacDonald said.

As ISB looks to the future, it remains committed to its mission of providing exceptional education that meets the needs of each student. With a steadfast dedication to innovation and inclusivity, ISB is poised to continue shaping the leaders of tomorrow.

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