Photo: Anfield School

# Going beyond the brochure

**Gayatri Bhaumik** examines how global curricula, cultural diversity and shifting demographics are shaping the city's cosmopolitan education scene

In an increasingly interconnected age, many parents in Hong Kong choose to enrol their children in international schools in the hope of giving them a more global perspective. These schools, often ranked among the city's best, have long been lauded for promoting cultural diversity and international curricula that help mould young global citizens.

Recently though, Hong Kong's international schools have faced criticism for not fulfilling their mandates as they used to. Instead, detractors argue that any "internationalism" is superficial and that the label is used to justify high fees.

So what does the international school scene in Hong Kong look like right now?

## Global understanding

For most international schools in Hong Kong, their mission begins with strong values that aim to foster a global outlook. "Our values place inclusivity, global understanding and cultural respect at the heart of school life," says Elise Rees, executive head teacher at Anfield School.

This can manifest in many ways, but global accreditations are an important means of communicating these schools' globally minded offerings. Many of these institutions are members of the Council of International Schools. Some also receive accreditation from the countries with which they are affiliated.

The German Swiss International School (GSIS), for instance, has accredited status from the German government as a Deutsch Auslandsschule (German school abroad).

Diversity is another factor. Local international schools abide by the Education Bureau's directive that 70 per cent of the student body be non-local. At GSIS, the student body comprises more than 30 nationalities, with sizeable cohorts from Europe, Asia, North America and Australasia.

The school's employees represent 24 countries, which principal Alexandra Freigang-Krause says "allows us to offer a more inclusive curriculum and perspective" as well as foster "a rich exchange of ideas and experiences".

Naturally, this leads to significant diversity in languages on campus. Competence in at least two languages is expected at most international schools in Hong Kong. "[GSIS's globalisation] is reflected in its curriculum, which incorporates multiple languages and perspectives, preparing students for a globalised world," Freigang-Krause affirms. Kindergarten students are placed into two streams: German and English, or Mandarin and English.

Similarly, nursery students at the Canadian International School of Hong Kong (CDNIS) follow a

Photo: German Swiss International School

bilingual English and Mandarin programme before adding another language, such as French or Spanish. However, not all international schools offer the same immersion. Many use English as the language of instruction and offer classes in a second language.

Global perspectives go beyond polyglotism of course, which is why many international schools in Hong Kong offer internationally recognised curricula alongside the national curriculum of the country they're affiliated with. For example, GSIS and CDNIS both offer the International Baccalaureate; the former also offers the German Abitur, while the latter has the Ontario Secondary School Diploma.

## Cultural infusions

International schools in Hong Kong also prioritise cultural exchange by way of festive celebrations such as Lunar New Year, Eid and Christmas. Some might criticise these efforts as token acknowledgements of different traditions, but many schools try to offer students a deeper cultural understanding with such celebrations. "I appreciate that the school celebrates different cultures," says Lani Tao, a parent with two children at Shrewsbury International School. "[For Diwali] the children were encouraged to wear colourful clothing, and they learned about [the festival] in class and at assembly. It was all done as part of the curriculum."

Many schools go further, implementing initiatives such as Anfield's annual Mother Tongue Month, which sees staff and students share aspects of their heritage. Others extend this cultural reach to extracurricular activities. GSIS offers the Model United Nations club – which encourages global citizenship by getting students to debate international issues – and has an exchange programme with partner schools, such as the German School of Geneva. All are designed to foster cultural understanding and a multicultural environment.

Parents can also be a factor in just how international a school is. Many schools invite parents to volunteer at cultural days, help organise cultural events – such as a Christmas bazaar or Lunar New Year celebration – or simply share traditions during classroom events and coffee mornings.

"These initiatives reflect our global-mindedness framework by promoting empathy, collaboration and a shared commitment to creating a welcoming environment for all students and families," explains Dr Karen Lindner, lower school principal at CDNIS.

## How international schools evolved in Hong Kong

Hong Kong got its first international school in 1894 when Kowloon British College (now King George V School, aka KGV) was founded to cater to the children of British expats. Today, according to the Education Bureau, there are 53 international schools in Hong Kong "designed for meeting the needs of non-local families, particular cultural or linguistic groups, and/or whose students do not wish to sit for local examinations". Over the years, the city's international schools may have changed a great deal, but they still abide by this mandate – albeit to different extents.

Freigang-Krause remembers that when she first arrived at GSIS, "the German-Swiss heritage was not very present". She and her team enhanced that aspect through initiatives such as offering free German language courses to staff and inviting international speakers to share their global expertise.

There has also been a shift in the type of families sending their children to the school.

"There are fewer and fewer classic expat families," Freigang-Krause notes. "Instead, there's an increasing number of mixed families, so students bring with them a far more international background now."

With Chinese-German heritage and citizenship from Germany, Canada and the US, Tao's children are representatives of this new, globally complex type of family, so she appreciates Shrewsbury's international outlook.

"I like how [the school] has blended global and local learning," she says, adding that topics of study have been introduced through the prism of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

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>
> ELISE REES, ANFIELD SCHOOL

**Dr Karen Lindner, Canadian International School of Hong Kong**

Yet, while international schools in Hong Kong celebrate more cultural events than ever and offer a multitude of languages and curricula, there is room for improvement.

"It would be wonderful to see even more diversity within the student population and teachers – more nationalities and cultures represented," Tao says.

Ultimately, Hong Kong's international schools have different things to offer. It's up to parents and students to choose how globalised an experience they want – opting between curricula, languages offered and cultural diversity.