

# Alliance continues to map ‘success story of our time’

## International education is thriving, says Terry Haywood, but we always need to be ready for new challenges

The Alliance for International Education (AIE) traces its origins to the beginning of the twenty-first century, when a meeting convened at the University of Bath prepared the way for the founding conference held in Geneva in September 2002. The intervening years have produced a series of biennial ‘world conferences’ which have been held in Düsseldorf (2004), Shanghai (2006), Istanbul (2008), Melbourne (2010) and Doha (2012), with the seventh scheduled for Mumbai in October this year. This time period, not much more than a decade, is a brief one even in the short lifespan of international education as we know it, but our professional and ideological landscapes have changed so much over these years that we can now say with certainty that we have entered a new era of international learning. Like every organization committed to education for global and inter-cultural awareness, the AIE is asking some key questions about where the emerging scenario is leading us – what lies ahead? And can we control and influence it?

It has been argued that the turn of the latest century coincided with a phase shift for international education (Bunnell, 2013), and indeed there were some who already identified this at the time. The new century was widely and optimistically welcomed as an opportunity to go beyond ‘consolidation’ (Wallace, 1999) with the prospect of international education entering an ‘era of influence’ (Mackenzie, 2004). Much of what has happened since then seems to bear out this encouraging forecast. International education is a success story of our time, but the consistent and well documented changes that have taken place, some overt but others not always obvious at first sight, present a set of questions for the future that could hardly have been imagined just a few years ago.

The most obvious changes are those that can be quantified, and if success is measured by the scale of our market sector then we have every reason for satisfaction. International schooling has expanded consistently and globally, apparently unaffected by economic and financial crises, and there is no sign that the rate of growth will slow down in the years to come. This is one indicator of our sector’s ‘influence’ and it can be argued that everyone has benefited. Bigger schools and more extensive networks mean more stability and security for institutions and jobs, more funding for investment in facilities and resources to support learning, and better professional opportunities for teachers. At the same time, international schools have moved away from providing a niche educational experience for ex-pats to becoming beacons of excellence with models of pedagogical practice and assessment qualifications that are sought after in national systems. The International Baccalaureate, with its Primary Years Programme, Middle Years Programme and Diploma Programme, is probably the best example of this phenomenon, but other curriculum and assessment providers such as the International Primary Curriculum and International Middle Years Curriculum, Cambridge International Examinations and the Advanced Placement International Diploma have evolved to play their part in ensuring that international schools are often ranked among the most prestigious educational institutions in many cities around the world.

The qualitative evolution of our schools has also been mapped but the picture that emerges shows trends that are more complex and open to multiple interpretations. In the first place, the most significant ‘drivers’ of growth in the past decade are indicative of the extent to which the

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context of international learning has changed. In fact, growth has been driven largely by groups who had been, until the present century, only marginal participants on the scene – local families prepared to invest in international perspectives and/or English language to give their children a competitive edge in the global economy. As early as 2010, the ISC Research Letter could assert ‘We estimate that, overall, 70-80% of international school students are now from local families, a complete reversal over the last 20 years’. (ISC, 2010). To what extent is this desire for a competitive edge compatible with the values of collaboration and integration that are often identified as characteristics of international mindedness?

At the same time, sustained levels of growth and a seemingly endless projection of demand into the future have impacted on the governance and ownership of international schools. The same ISC Newsletter reported that ‘Until perhaps 10 years ago, international schools were still perceived by many as an expatriate and non-profit phenomenon. Now, many international schools, especially new ones, are for-profit and cater largely to wealthy local families’. Not surprisingly, the 28 billion dollar market has attracted corporate investors and the expansion of privately owned schools has fuelled the emergence of conglomerates or profit-driven networks who share a common owner, brand or major shareholder. Entrepreneurial interest is an important contributor to the expansion of our sector, but how does it impact on the values that are so important to the philosophy of many internationally minded schools? The distinction between pragmatically and ideologically driven schools has become much more complex and questionable. Is there any reason, for instance, why for-profit schools cannot also have high ethical standards and a genuine commitment to encouraging international mindedness or global awareness in their students?

Those who envisaged a period of ‘consolidation’ seem to have been excessively conservative, but in some ways at least they may have been correct. The era of curriculum and pedagogical innovation of 20 years ago, when international schools saw the flowering of myriad projects focused on devising innovative ways to establish a truly international approach to learning and the promotion of global awareness, has given way to the emergence of branding as a characteristic of the major curriculum and assessment models. This has been an inevitable consequence of the global market as schools and families seek standardized certifications for learning with qualifications that have a respected international currency, but does the current climate stifle innovation? Is there still a place for small scale, localized projects focused on providing for the specific school contexts? And what place is there in the international schools network for national and state-sponsored schools that would like to internationalize learning but that operate without the level of funding that allows them to access the major providers in curriculum and who may in any case be constrained to work within national programme outlines? How can we allow access for students in these schools to

the know-how we have developed and encourage global mindedness outside our ‘elite’ establishments?

Another frequently cited issue generated by growth is the need to recruit an expanding number of teachers to international schools, but while this is often seen as a problem of finding available human resources in national education systems, a separate dilemma regards the extent to which training and orientation is going to be available for these new cohorts. Is there a risk that more teachers will draw on experiences from their national backgrounds without training in international pedagogies, undermining the philosophical foundations for our professional roles? Or is there a new responsibility for educational leaders to learn how to forge effective inter-cultural teams made up of colleagues from different national systems working together in the same school?

These are just some of the questions emerging from trends that have characterized the past 14 years and that make the current climate so interesting. One thing is clear – we are still in flux and transition, and nobody expects evolution to come to a standstill. But apart from the continued forecasts of optimistic quantitative growth there is no clarity in how the ideological climate and the professional expectations of international education will evolve. The AIE has always believed that provoking reflection and critique is the essential step towards a better comprehension of the nature of our mission. In this sense the questions posed 14 years ago in Geneva to help promote international and intercultural understanding through education remain as valid today as ever. The context in which they are posed and answered, however, is radically different. The six AIE world conferences to date have helped to chart our changing world, and in Mumbai this October – where the conference theme will be Intercultural Understanding: Reflection, Responsibility and Action –there will be many hoping that the seventh conference will help us to navigate through unexplored waters as we enter the next phase. After all, the millennium, and even the century, is still young.

### References

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*Further information about the Alliance for International Education can be accessed via its website: [www.intedalliance.org](http://www.intedalliance.org)*