Challenges of Managing International Schools

Kato Nabirye H.

Faculty of Business, Kampala International University, Uganda

ABSTRACT

The rapid proliferation of international schools, driven by globalization and increased mobility, has brought to the forefront complex challenges in their management. These schools, which serve diverse expatriate and local communities, often struggle with defining their identity amidst inconsistent interpretations of "internationality." This paper examines the multifaceted difficulties international schools face, including curriculum development, staff recruitment and retention, financial sustainability, regulatory inconsistencies, and the pressures of cultural diversity. Drawing from historical evolution, case-based insights, and governance models, the paper emphasizes the nuanced interplay between global education demands and localized execution. It also highlights the gaps in comparative empirical studies and offers strategic recommendations for effective leadership, stakeholder involvement, and context-sensitive innovation in managing international schools.
Keywords: International education, global curriculum, expatriate schooling, multicultural management, educational governance, staff recruitment.

INTRODUCTION

International schools are schools which offer either an international curriculum or develop students for a global citizenship. Traditionally international schools were non-profit institutions established by families who belong to an elite global class. They have been an attractive field for research for pedagogues and sociologists over the last decades. Questions on international schools are often guided by the dichotomy between elite and cosmopolitan, with the former seen as negative, and the latter as more desirable. This leads to theoretical discussions on globalisation, class and pedagogies. However, these discussions rarely manifest in empirical comparative studies on international schools, even though a number of non-profit organisations are passionately working on these matters. Although international schools, based on an international curriculum, number only a few thousand compared with the vast majority of national schools, they are favoured by globally mobile families. Therefore, while international schooling is currently mostly a privilege of an elite global class, the growth of international schools is not likely to diminish in the near future as information and communication technology is getting increasingly faster and more mobile. Currently the estimated number of internationally schools offering an English curriculum is between 4000-6000, in particular, IB World Schools. Located mostly in metropolitan and financial centres the number is ever-growing. 2016 must have been a turning point as that was the year when Westerners were increasingly forced to relocate outside of countries such as China and Thailand. Systemic drop in demand has been accompanied with an outstanding number of new schools [1, 2].

Understanding International Schools

Following the initial establishment of international schools by embassies and corporations post-World War II, there are now over 7,000 such schools worldwide, with a demand for an additional 3,000 on three continents. Over the past 70 years, international schools have diversified significantly. They vary greatly in culture, governance, internationalization, multiculturalism, and interculturality. The definition of 'international school' remains debated among scholars; these schools serve foreign nationals and residents, operating under different governance, curricula, and pedagogy than host country schools. Foreign-type schools typically employ majority foreign teachers or use a foreign language as the medium of instruction. Described as "multiply-embedded schools," they encompass dimensions such as social class, locus of control, and access, with their governance often influenced by location. International schools can

be categorized based on governance models involving parents, embassies, foundations, or private entities, affecting their professionalization, with lower educational levels sometimes seen among school leaders. Parents of less esteemed institutions frequently express concerns about governance and management. Language of instruction and eligibility criteria also vary widely; some schools adopt classical curricula while others implement 'western' education. Entrance requirements, such as exams or interviews, differ, with some schools actively recruiting students to meet quotas and others limiting admissions to children under 6 years old. Searching for international schools can be complex, particularly for those far from established international networks, potentially leading to discrimination in eligibility. Various audiovisual resources exist, showcasing student and parent experiences in specific international school settings [3, 4].

Cultural Diversity in International Schools

As defined by the Council of International Schools, international schools must meet a set of standards. However, 'international' is used in various contexts, leading to many interpretations. At a minimum, an international school educates students representing two or more nationalities, and it identifies with a country other than the one in which it is located. More widespread definitions encompass the use of a curriculum that is not strictly national or local, such as a national curriculum other than that of the host country, the International Baccalaureate, or the British Cambridge examinations. Other international schools apply international curricula in conjunction with national curricula. But, contrary to popular belief, the use of an international curriculum does not necessarily make a school international. Schools using national curricula can and often do fulfil the minimum definition of international schools. Lastly, the governance and management of a school can be multinational/multiple nationalities or foreign (meaning that its owners or managers do not work for the national education authority of the host country). International in this sense can also signify independent or private. The diverse needs of students who attend international schools are similar to those who attend national schools, and the challenges and opportunities faced by the management and staff of the two types of school bear many resemblances. Nevertheless, significant differences exist, due to the multicultural dimensions of environments inhabited predominantly by expatriates or where individuals of diverse nationalities rub shoulders with one another. This raises the question of whether international schools should adapt their management to the multicultural environments in which they exist. Most management theories were developed in North America, and what is taken for granted in these cultures does not apply everywhere. In universities and boards of directors, a greater emphasis may be placed on consensus than on getting straight to the point or making decisions based on reasoning and fact [5, 6].

Regulatory Challenges

One challenge International Schools face is the lack of a clear, consistent definition, leading to variations in structures, governance, and educational philosophies. Since the mid-19th century, when the International School of Geneva was established, the demand for these schools has surged, especially in areas with high capital. Today, there are over 5,000 International Schools globally, serving more than 4 million pupils. Unlike traditional national schools, these institutions can vary significantly from one another, with some national schools marketed as international. Their differences often relate to the expat demographics they serve, with a substantial number of teaching and administrative positions in the Anglophone sphere due to the historical preference for English Medium Education, primarily following British and American curricula. However, in certain areas, local elites are establishing International Schools featuring European and Asian curricula. For instance, while all IB schools in Macau claim to be international, some serve primarily less affluent American and British expats. Many 'International Schools' may provide an educational experience largely based on national systems with merely one foreign language offered as an option. Additionally, the concept of 'internationality' may vary between institutions, ranging from homogeneous practices aligned with English Medium World Curricula like the International Baccalaureate and Cambridge Curriculum to mixed models that include national curricula alongside international qualifications. Each approach provides a distinct perspective for analyzing and defining International Schools [7, 8].

Curriculum Development

Developing a curriculum in any school is one of the biggest challenges for scholars and educational leaders, as any deviation from the minimum standards can lead to chaos, mismanagement or loss of authority. The international context increases the challenges as a result of a great amount of variables: students' different language proficiencies, several cultural backgrounds, an ever-changing staff and other peculiarities of their host country such as government regulations, legislation and seasonality. However,

every challenge brings a chance, so a joint examination of both challenges and opportunities is needed to extract some creative ideas and solutions. In addition to direct field observations and systematic literature reviews, it is very beneficial to collaborate, listen to, and learn from the experiences of other international schools facing similar challenges en route to successfully achieving wonders. In due consideration of their three dimensions: (i) staff; (ii) students; and (iii) host country; two types of challenges and opportunities must be found: (i) common ones found in most international schools; and (ii) unique ones, faced alone by one international school but with immense potential and creativity for generating solutions. It must be hoped that all the challenges of curriculum development can take full advantage of all their corresponding opportunities, and hopes this presentation will provide some helpful insights [9, 10].

Staff Recruitment and Retention

A large international school may have to recruit dozens of educators to fill an equal number of holes, posing as a recruiter in addition to the normal role of a school leader. New teachers are recruited for various reasons, such as a new program requiring additional educators, relocation of a current educator, artificial educational attrition and/or retirements, or existing educators choosing to leave the school. For the sake of the school, it is often hoped that new educators can fill positions quickly. A school would like to have all staff members hired and in place in July, with contracts in hand, but with 1 and/or 2 half-IVAD schools in France, it is nearly impossible. Many candidates have competing offers; those responding to an advertisement in January are often gone in days or weeks. The navigation of unexplored waters can often feel blind. This chapter primarily will discuss the position of a new administrator trying to either recruit educators at the school or share the job of recruiting educators with the existing administration. It may be best to recruit the editor or writer of a book. Internationally-acclaimed recruiters will frequently not be interested in the recruitment process of one chosen school, preferring instead to work for recruiters of publicity, sharing advertisements with as many schools as possible. Ideally, however, it can offset that feeling of panic of having to recruit dozens (or hundreds) of educators at the same time in a new language and culture, which can feel dramatically paralyzing. Educator recruiting in international schools is a growing concern of school leaders year to year, bringing varying responses from administrators at multiple levels of leadership. The recruitment of candidates from outside the nation and outside the ranks of the existing education staff is a cross-cultural process fraught with uncertainty and potential pitfalls. Many of these pitfalls can be endured while others can be avoided altogether by creating a responsible, targeted approach to searching for candidates [11, 12].

Parental Involvement

Setting up an international school requires meticulous planning, research, and collaboration, typically involving an international school board and a director. Challenges arise from various site-specific conditions like government regulations, finances, available human resources, and cultural factors, which make it impossible to directly replicate plans from one location to another. While international schools share needs for governance, finance, pedagogy, student care, and staff well-being, significant differences affect their preparations. These differences must be examined under several categories, including governance model, finances, site and buildings, human resources, curriculum, parental care, communication, student care, and staff well-being. The establishment of international schools is accompanied by more thorough investigation than traditional schools, with limited existing models, leading many operators to rely on personal expertise and research. Variability between cultures significantly influences governance, board composition, budget, recruitment, and student support. Thus, a starting director must engage in a thorough investigation of local conditions and the cultural backgrounds of families and staff to determine best practices for their unique situation, rather than merely replicating solutions from other institutions [13, 14].

Financial Management

Over the last three decades, management competencies have gained significant importance, impacting the effectiveness of educational institutions and sustainability of practices. Complaints about international schools being "business-like" or "profit-making" emerged alongside the rapid growth of overseas education in China, reflecting a broader trend. Few international schools operate purely on charity; most consider financial aspects vital. In the globalization of education, cities like Dubai, Singapore, Hong Kong, and London actively vie for international education, prioritizing financial considerations. Increased competition necessitates effective school management. The rise in international schools has also led to challenges such as student recruitment issues, teacher turnover, and budget deficits. While having qualified Chinese teachers can contribute to success, it is no longer sufficient. Despite anecdotal evidence of high turnover rates, research comparing successful and struggling international schools remains

limited and methodologically deficient. This lack of studies highlights the complex nature of school management, which is crucial in implementing educational practices. As the environment around international schools rapidly changes, innovative responses to these challenges are urgently needed [15, 16].

Technology Integration

International schools are defined by their transitory populations of students, faculty, and administration, leading to unique challenges in school leadership. Educators, often US-trained, must navigate new cultural environments, prompting questions about how to adapt their knowledge effectively. Unlike domestic institutions, the predictability of educational systems and cultures is questionable, making it unrealistic to anticipate that transferred knowledge will apply uniformly. Educational leadership occurs within a complex context influenced by systems, cultures, and individual experiences, leading to misaligned practices. International schools face distinct issues that often require unconventional solutions, as educational policy and leadership vary greatly. The functional separation between fee-for-service agreements, national services, and international schools profoundly impacts the structure of educational leadership, revealing that frameworks within these institutions are often inadequate and strained [17, 18].

Student Support Services

Student Support Services in Taiwan utilizes an inclusive framework for international students, encompassing recruitment, pre-arrival, arrival, visa, academic, financial, legal, health, social, recreational, and counselling services. Many K-12 international schools have dedicated personnel responsible for these services, although some, like legal and health-related support, are outsourced. Recruitment for international schools typically involves hiring agencies that promote the school, help applicants, and utilize international organizations for advertisement, including pamphlets and recruitment fairs. Most international students transfer from other schools, prompting "get to know" meetings with them and their parents, which can be scheduled based on need and may occur online or in person. Opinions among service managers about arrival services vary; while most agree on the necessity of these services, some feel schools should primarily coordinate rather than provide them directly. Collaborations with taxi services for pick-up assistance are common. Visa and immigration services are universally acknowledged as essential, though the method of handling these services varies between schools. Some manage these processes internally, while others partner with visa agencies. Regarding academic support, there is consensus on its importance, with some service managers advocating for subject teachers to take the primary role, supported by personnel teachers as coordinators. Event planning and language support are key components of this support. Financial aid is also deemed critical; service managers agree on offering financial support services, which can differ among schools. Scholarships may appear as free tuition or cover miscellaneous fees, and some schools specifically assist overseas Chinese students in applying for tuition exemptions provided by Taiwan's Ministry of Education [19, 20].

Crisis Management

International schools face various crises that can endanger staff and students' well-being and harm the institution's reputation. These crises can include public allegations of misconduct, safety issues like violence or accidents, or serious incidents affecting students or personnel. The unique makeup of international school communities introduces specific management challenges due to diverse cultures and customs. Cross-cultural dimensions complicate the clarification of roles and responsibilities, making cultural competence essential. This involves diagnosing and managing issues shaped by different social and cultural understandings. When a crisis occurs, administrators must assess on-site and evolving factors to gauge potential negative impact and recognize the influence of various actors with their own agendas. Preparedness is crucial, often necessitating a crisis management plan that includes a FAQ or Q&A addressing anticipated questions, helping to disseminate relevant information quickly. Identifying community connections that could aid or hinder crisis resolution is important. Administrators must be ready to implement various contingency strategies and should be aware of media limitations, selecting spokespeople judiciously and equipping them with appropriate strategies beforehand. Furthermore, schools must promptly acknowledge and rectify any mistakes made during a crisis [21, 22].

Community Engagement

International schools often struggle to engage with local communities, leading to misunderstandings and perceptions of being "invisible." Community members typically see these schools as exclusive and elitist, often defined by their IB curriculum, which is viewed as cosmopolitan and criticized for its language proficiency focus. This distance from communities' results in missed opportunities for attracting potential

students and families. However, prolonged engagement may lead to beneficial hybrid adaptations for both schools and communities. In the Asia-Pacific, some international schools have successfully responded to the expatriate community's needs but face demographic shifts, prompting a need to address local perceptions. This transformation brings culturally and ethnically diverse contexts, requiring careful examination of interactions among different community aspects. While community engagement is well documented in K-12 education, international schools receive little attention in this regard. This study investigates demographic shifts in these institutions and outlines their roles in shaping circumstances for users and adapting to changes, focusing on practitioners' contributions. Notably, the nature of school-community engagement varies based on each school's interpretation of community involvement, which is evident in their engagement structures and the sense of belonging fostered within these relationships. Experiences of practitioners reveal three distinct types of community engagement, shaped by reactions to evolving demographics and engagement frameworks [23, 24].

Future Trends in International Education

The future of international education will evolve globally, presenting both significant opportunities and challenges. Changes in the international education landscape will depend on how well schools adapt to varying market demands. In the coming decades, as student demand rises and more schools emerge, their ability to respond effectively will be crucial. Schools and their students serve as primary representatives of the international education community. Students now face diverse choices regarding schools, learning methods, and opportunities, necessitating a shift in how school leaders understand and address the needs of complex global learners. The future will also be shaped by the geopolitics of the global economy, local dynamics, and new educational technologies that enhance individual learning access. As the number of new schools rises, differentiation in branding and identity will create both opportunities and challenges. Schools lacking robust infrastructure in less favorable areas may experience dwindling enrollments and risk collapse. Political dynamics could further fragment international schooling systems. Education is increasingly a key diplomatic tool, but established international schools will face competition from national systems and non-state providers. Additionally, there's a growing awareness among education ministries regarding the inequities in segmented education systems, which primarily benefit privileged groups and certain ethnic minorities. Finally, resistance to globalization is rising, fueled by concerns over preserving cultural integrity amidst perceived Western domination [25, 26, 27].

CONCLUSION

Managing international schools in today's globalized landscape presents a unique and evolving set of challenges. These range from navigating ambiguous definitions of what constitutes an "international" school, to adapting curricula that meet diverse cultural and linguistic needs, to resolving financial and governance concerns that often arise from operating across jurisdictions. As this paper illustrates, the lack of unified regulatory standards and empirical frameworks makes it difficult for administrators to uniformly apply best practices. Nevertheless, by embracing cultural diversity, engaging local context in planning, professionalizing school leadership, and fostering inclusive governance, international schools can transcend these obstacles. Ultimately, strategic innovation and collaborative learning among institutions hold the key to sustaining high-quality education in multicultural environments and ensuring their relevance in a rapidly changing global educational landscape.

REFERENCES

1. Bunnell T, Gardner-Mctaggart A. The cultural capital of senior leaders in elite traditional international schools: an enduring 'leadership nobility'?. International Journal of Leadership in Education. 2022 Oct 30:1-9. tandfonline.com
2. Wright E. The proliferation of international schools: Implications for educational stratification. Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education. 2024 Mar 25:1-20. [HTML]
3. Chimbunde P, Moreeng BB. Beyond One-Size-Fits-All Approach: Teaching Multicultural Classrooms in South African Schools. IAFOR Journal of Education. 2024;12(3):41-57.
4. Schippling A. Researching international schools: Challenges for comparative educational research. Revista Lusófona de Educação. 2018(41):193-204.
5. Ngoc NM, Hieu VM, Tien NH. Impact of accreditation policy on quality assurance activities of public and private universities in Vietnam. International journal of public sector performance management. 2023;10:1-5. researchgate.net
6. Anh DB, Tien NH, Anh DB. Using Hoffer matrix in strategic business analysis for Nguyen Hoang Group in Vietnam. International journal multidisciplinary research and growth evaluation. 2021;2(4):61-6. researchgate.net

7. Xiong Y, Ling Q, Li X. Ubiquitous e-Teaching and e-Learning: China's Massive Adoption of Online Education and Launching MOOCs Internationally during the COVID-19 Outbreak. Wireless Communications and Mobile Computing. 2021;2021(1):6358976. wiley.com

8. Weist MD, Hoover SA, Daly BP, Short KH, Bruns EJ. Propelling the global advancement of school mental health. Clinical child and family psychology review. 2023 Dec;26(4):851-64. springer.com

9. Shadiyev A. EDUCATION MANAGEMENT IN PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN UZBEKISTAN: DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES, CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS. International Journal of Artificial Intelligence. 2025 Mar 24;1(2):308-13.

10. Roiha A, Sommier M. Exploring teachers' perceptions and practices of intercultural education in an international school. Intercultural Education. 2021 Jul 4;32(4):446-63.

11. Bunnell T. The crypto-growth of "international schooling": Emergent issues and implications. Educational Review. 2022 Jan 2;74(1):39-56.

12. Sanjani MA. The Impact of School Principals on Graduate Quality Through Character Education Initiatives. Journal of Educational Management Research. 2024 Jun 18;3(1):30-46.

13. Koplowitz S. On Site: Methods for Site-Specific Performance Creation. Oxford University Press; 2022.

14. Bueno FB, Günther WM, Philippi Jr A, Henderson J. Site-specific framework of sustainable practices for a Brazilian contaminated site case study. Science of the Total Environment. 2021 Dec 20;801:149581. [HTML]

15. Katureebe Y, Turyamureeba S, Rahim A, Eze CE, Eze VH. The The Effect of Financial Management on the Learning Ability of Students in Government-Aided Primary Schools in Ibanda Municipality Uganda. International Journal of Humanities, Management and Social Science (IJ-HuMaSS). 2023 Dec 27;6(2):109-18. researchgate.net

16. Ngoc NM, Tien NH. Quality of scientific research and world ranking of public and private universities in Vietnam. International journal of public sector performance management. 2023;10(1):1-5. academia.edu

17. Stein S. Critical internationalization studies at an impasse: Making space for complexity, uncertainty, and complicity in a time of global challenges. Studies in Higher Education. 2021 Sep 2;46(9):1771-84.

18. Ogenyi FC, Eze VH, Ugwu CN. Navigating Challenges and Maximizing Benefits in the Integration of Information and Communication Technology in African Primary Schools. International Journal of Humanities, Management and Social Science (IJ-HuMaSS). 2023 Dec 20;6(2):101-8.

19. Wang T, Lund BD, Marengo A, Pagano A, Mannuru NR, Teel ZA, Pange J. Exploring the potential impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on international students in higher education: Generative AI, chatbots, analytics, and international student success. Applied Sciences. 2023 May 31;13(11):6716. mdpi.com

20. Yobol JP. Student Satisfaction with International Student Support Services at a Mid-Atlantic University. ProQuest LLC. 789 East Eisenhower Parkway, PO Box 1346, Ann Arbor, MI 48106; 2014.

21. Perez-Encinas A, Ammigan R. Support services at Spanish and US institutions: A driver for international student satisfaction. Journal of International students. 2016 Oct 1;6(4):984-98.

22. Brooks M, Creely E, Laletas S. Coping through the unknown: School staff wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic. International journal of educational research open. 2022 Jan 1;3:100146. sciencedirect.com

23. Fronek P, Briggs L, Liang J, Gallagher H, Doherty A, Charles B, McDonald S. Australian social work academics respond to international students in crisis during COVID-19. InFrontiers in Education 2021 Mar 17 (Vol. 6, p. 637583). Frontiers Media SA. frontiersin.org

24. Sanders MG. Community involvement in schools: From concept to practice. Education and urban society. 2003 Feb;35(2):161-80.

25. Herrington N. Building communities for the future. Research in Teacher Education. 2013 Apr 1;3(1):18-21.

26. Li M. Adapting legal education for the changing landscape of regional emerging economies: A dynamic framework for law majors. Journal of the Knowledge Economy. 2024 Sep;15(3):10227-56.

27. Mohamed Hashim MA, Tlemsani I, Matthews R. Higher education strategy in digital transformation. Education and Information Technologies. 2022 Apr;27(3):3171-95. springer.com