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The internationalisation of British primary and secondary schools

Investors are increasingly striking deals to gain licensing agreements with British independent schools to use their names to open for-profit schools outside the UK, often in emerging markets.

Take Dulwich College International as an example, it has expanded rapidly across Asia over the last decade, pitching itself under the banner of Dulwich College, one of England's oldest independent schools. But unlike Dulwich College, which is a registered charity, Dulwich College International is a profit-driven enterprise run by investors.

According to the Independent Schools Council's latest data, UK independent schools now are involved with 129 international campuses outside the UK, up from 107 in 2023. Our [recent research](#), published in the International Business Review, has examined the way in which these international licensing agreements from British independent schools work.

We interviewed 98 people related to either the British public schools involved in these international franchises or those involved in the franchises themselves. They covered 12 countries, including the UK, Singapore, Dubai, Qatar, China, Malaysia, Thailand, South Korea, and Hong Kong.

During our research, we've given much thought to the ethical side of these licensing agreements.

British independent schools do not tend to invest in these international ventures directly. Instead, they enter licensing agreements, allowing their prestigious names to be used in return for a fee that can generate additional income streams for the schools to provide scholarships and bursaries to school children and address their charitable objectives.

This creates a curious paradox: British independent schools benefit from global brand-building without assuming any financial risk. But with that also comes a potential reputational gamble: if these for-profit institutions fail to uphold the standards associated with their original namesakes, who then takes responsibility?

Of course, we all know that British independent schools command high fees from parents. At the same time, 90% of them are still registered as charities and their mission is to educate, rather than to generate profit. They tend to reinvest surplus funds into facilities, teaching and scholarships.

However, these overseas franchises operate in a different model, with profit as the driving force. They are symptomatic of the increasing dominance of financial markets and investments in our education system.

The British independent schools' involvement with these overseas ventures raises an interesting question whether the value of these overseas schools aligned with the core educational values and missions of the original institutions back in the UK.

The rapid growth of British independent school brands in overseas markets is not just a business strategy; it is a transformation of what these institutions stand for.

While licensing agreements provide short-term financial gain and global prestige, they also commodify educational heritage, turning centuries-old institutions into assets to be traded in international markets.

We need to consider greater transparency and oversight, as well as more robust ethical guidelines when it comes to using the names of our treasured independent schools that carry the national reputational heritage and were established to advance children's education.

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- *The post represents the views of its author(s), not the position of LSE's Department of Management or the London School of Economics.*

About the author



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Dr Helen Hu is an LSE Fellow in the Department of Management. Helen's current research focuses on the internationalisation of educational enterprises in emerging economy settings and exploring how these emerging organisations leverage assets from organisations in developed market economies.



John Bryson

Professor John Bryson is Chair in Enterprise and Economic Geography at Birmingham Business School. John's research is motivated by a desire to understand and explain the complex ways in which production is organized through space and in place and via a variety of forms of enterprise.



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