New research into the features of international schools in China, and the range and challenges of headship roles.
It would seem that nearly every week we hear of a new international school setting up in China. It is now the country with the largest and fastest-growing number of international schools, with perhaps greater opportunities in terms of educational careers, investments and partnerships than anywhere else in the world. At the same time, however, it is also seen as a particularly challenging environment where risks are high.

At RSAcademics we are increasingly being asked to help owners and operators find the right leaders for their schools in China. So we decided to undertake some research into the environment, challenges and rewards of working there, involving people who have first-hand experience of running international schools in China.

It has been fascinating hearing their vivid experiences and, in particular, learning about the wide range of situations and environments in which leaders find themselves.

Indeed, a key finding from our work was to discover just how varied the experience of leading different schools can be. A key achievement of this report is, we hope, to make sense of this variety, and in so doing, give people additional understanding of the range of issues in play when they are considering career, investment and partnership opportunities.

We are very grateful to all the participants who provided personal insights and were so open and helpful in explaining their role, the environment in which they work, the challenges they have faced and the joys and rewards that make it all worthwhile.

We hope you find this an interesting and informative read.

Please also visit our website to download other ground-breaking and practical publications from RSAcademics, for example:

- *The Art of International School Headship* – research into the challenges of leading an international school and the leadership qualities needed for success
- *Ten Trends* - facts, insight and commentary on ten factors and trends that shape independent education.

Russell Speirs
Founder and CEO
RSAcademics
Introduction
Aims
Method
Features of China and its international schools

The positives
It's complicated!
Variation in leaders’ roles
Catering primarily for Chinese children
Bilingual schools
Features of government regulation
Requirement for dual leadership
Governance and ownership
Chinese culture - children and families
Growth and scale

The right stuff for China
Insights from the business world
International experience in challenging environments
Attitude and outlook
Politically astute and organisationally savvy
Cross-cultural competence

Support for leaders
Professional support
Personal support

Why do things go wrong?
Leaders find themselves in unworkable situations
Wrong person appointed
Lack of due diligence
Unable to adapt sufficiently

Due diligence checklist

Conclusion
INTRODUCTION

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY AN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL?

In this report an international school means a school in mainland China which teaches, at least in part, a curriculum in English.

Our research, *The Art of International School Headship*, looked at the challenges of leading an international school and the leadership qualities needed for success. That report was based on the views of over 100 school leaders in 20 countries across Asia and the Gulf, including 10 from China. The report can be downloaded from our website at www.rsacademics.co.uk/publications

The publication was well received at international education conferences, with hundreds of downloads and copies of the report distributed in the first year. During conversations with school leaders we had heard how the challenges highlighted in our report were particularly marked in mainland China, and how the short tenure of heads, a feature of many international schools, was an even greater issue there.

We also continued to hear about huge opportunities in international education in China with a growing demand for international school leaders outstripping supply. It would seem that almost every international head or aspiring head will have an opportunity to move to China in the next few years if they haven't already been approached.

This growth, opportunity and interest in international schools in China, combined with the particular challenges of working there, has prompted us to now take a closer look at this one country.
LEADING AN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL IN CHINA

Whilst there are several examples of experienced heads leaving China in short succession, there are also examples of long tenure and great success. We wanted to explore these differences and try to understand the reality of being an international school leader in China. Why do some leaders thrive while others seem to hardly get off the ground? What’s different about China? What are the common threads?

This report is written explicitly from the perspective of the international head, by which we mean a head of school who is not Chinese and who will have experience of education in other parts of the world, usually in international education, although sometimes in a single national system. There will come a time when there are Chinese nationals filling the leadership roles in some international schools in China, but for the moment almost all schools deemed to be international have heads who are not Chinese. In describing the situations that face international heads in China, there is a risk that some of the research, and in particular the quotes from heads used to illustrate each section, will highlight in a somewhat stark way the challenges encountered by non-Chinese heads. This report inevitably focuses on the challenges encountered, but we have also included a section describing the positives and the opportunities which we hope provides some balance.

INTRODUCTION

China, along with UAE, is the fastest growing large international school market, with the greatest number of international schools in the world – estimated at 564.

Over 80% of international schools in China recruit Chinese students. Of these, about one third recruit both Chinese and foreign students.

There are over 900,000 Chinese students studying abroad. The most popular destinations are the US, the UK, Australia, South Korea and Japan.

IS CHINA MORE CHALLENGING FOR EXPAT LEADERS?

A few years ago, the Harvard Business Review made the following comment about expat business leaders in China: “Hard numbers are lacking, but anecdotal evidence suggests that underperformance and early departures add up to a failure rate there that is twice that for expats in other countries.”

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The main aims of this research are:

- to understand the reality of leading an international school in China - in particular, exploring the different types of schools and environments that operate
- to throw more light on the factors that influence success, or otherwise, of leaders
- to help leaders who are considering a move to, or within, China undertake due diligence to assess an opportunity
- to help recruiters, including colleagues within RSAcademics, consider aspects of “fit”
- to help existing and prospective boards and school owners reflect on their own management structure, set-up and governance.
We spoke with 20 people - 15 current and former school leaders of international schools in China, and five other people including board members, recruiters and multinational companies in China.

In the case of current school leaders, our research usually included a visit to their school. We learnt about the specific context and set-up of their school and their personal experience. Most had been leaders of schools in other countries and several had led different schools within China itself. They were therefore able to compare and contrast these different environments and take a broad perspective.

We focused on their specific challenges and the factors that influenced their success, working within the context of their particular leadership roles.

We also reviewed writing and research into expat leadership in China, mainly outside the education sector - considering similarities and differences in education.

**Note:** because of the relatively small sample and the use of quotes to illustrate our findings, we have decided not to list names of participants or schools in this report. However, our sample included a range of types of school: expat schools (see definition on page 11), joint ventures, private schools, schools within the Chinese state sector, schools within a group and stand-alone schools. The schools were located in Beijing or Shanghai and surrounding cities.
Many of the leaders we spoke with were very experienced heads who had worked in several different countries. It was interesting to hear their perspectives on what’s different about China – aspects which, if not unique, were particular features of the international education environment there.

“I have 30 plus years in international schools but arriving here I realise I am like a babe in the Chinese woods.”

“What’s different about China – in my experience it’s issues to do with regulations, foreign passport Chinese, the role of the Chinese principal, dual curriculum and support staff outside your control.”

“Whatever you know and wherever you have worked, China will surprise you and challenge you in every way possible.”
THE POSITIVES

This report mainly focuses on the challenges of working in China - of which there are many - but there are also huge positives. We met leaders who were clearly relishing their roles - people for whom moving to China was one of their best career and life decisions.

Some of the features most appreciated by leaders we met include:

- **Investment** Some of the schools we visited were truly amazing creations. Their scale, facilities, quality, design and level of investment are second to none.
- **Possibilities** An environment where you can put new ideas into practice and create something distinctive and of the highest quality, and achieve some amazing results.
- **Dynamic changing environment** An exciting, fast-changing environment with dozens of new schools opening every year, massive infrastructure developments and societal and political change.
- **Career opportunities** This is the biggest and fastest growing large international school market. You can have a fast-moving, exciting and very rewarding career in one location.
- **Commitment and enthusiasm for education** They are some of the hardest-working, most committed and receptive students and parents in the world, with a state fully committed to education and its investment. There is never a doubt about the importance of what you are doing.
- **Status** Linked to this is the status you and your school have within the wider community.
- **Local staff quality and work ethic** The ability, attitude and commitment of local staff.
- **Nation building** Contributing to the development of, what is soon to be, the largest economy in the world, and supporting the development of its talent at one of the most exciting times in its history.
- **China itself** Fascination for Chinese culture, history and political context. In an increasingly converging homogenised world this is somewhere truly different.
- **Reward** Good pay and benefits and a lower cost of living than many places.
- **Demand** Many schools could be filled several times over.
“There is constant media interest in what we are doing.”

“A wonderful thing about working here is the highly qualified local support staff. They are a delight to work with. There is no cynicism – just real enthusiasm and pride for what we are creating together.”

“95% of staff live on site and we have a real work hard, play hard boarding school community.”

“We have already established our brand, ethos and even what are starting to feel like traditions. It’s a once in a lifetime opportunity to make a mark on something that will become part of a leading education group.”

“We have the hardest working students in the world.”

“It is fascinating watching China change and develop.”

“Here you can really be innovative in your marketing and the links you can set up with leading organisations internationally. Anything is possible.”

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“Here you can really be innovative in your marketing and the links you can set up with leading organisations internationally. Anything is possible.”
IT’S COMPLICATED - DIFFERENT TYPES OF SCHOOLS, SITUATIONS AND LEADERSHIP ROLES

Early on in our research, from speaking with just a few leaders of international schools, we quickly discovered significant differences in the reality of their roles.

Consider, for example, the difference in these two examples of international schools in China:

1. Leading an international branch of a Chinese state school. The expat leader reports to Chinese principals under the scrutiny of the local education department, receives shared support services from the state school infrastructure, has 50:50 expat / Chinese teachers, teaching a bilingual curriculum exclusively for Chinese students.

Compared with:

2. Leading an international school for expats which is part of a well-known brand, has an international governing body, a Chinese principal who works in a mostly external-facing role, almost entirely expat teachers and students following an exclusively international curriculum with dedicated support staff reporting into the head.

MANY OF THE LEADERS WE MET DESCRIBED THEIR ROLE AND THEIR SCHOOL AS “AN EXCEPTION”

TYPES OF INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS IN CHINA

Note: In this report “international school” means a school in China which teaches, at least in part, a curriculum in English

Expat schools

Officially called “Schools for Children of Foreign Workers”, they are not allowed to enrol Chinese nationals – but now include a large number of Chinese families with foreign passports. These schools can teach 100% international curriculum.

Expat schools include several well-established schools and account for about a quarter of international school students in China. However, they are unlikely to grow and may in fact decline in line with a reducing reliance on expats in China.

Chinese state schools

International streams teaching a bilingual curriculum as a branch or program within a state school. About a quarter of the international school student population in China.

Chinese private schools

Aimed mainly at Chinese children, these follow a bilingual curriculum that can fulfil the requirements of the compulsory national curriculum in Years 1-9 whilst meeting the desire to obtain international qualifications. They include joint ventures between a Chinese owner and a foreign school which provides educational expertise as well as brand / reputation.

This is the area of greatest growth with over half the international school student population.
Whilst the type of school is a key factor, this doesn’t account for the variation explained by the leaders we met.

“I have visited about 50 international schools in China and I don’t know that I have ever seen two that are the same.”

The variation among schools in China would seem to be a product of a number of factors which we will explore in more detail throughout this report.

RECENT REGULATORY CHANGES

A change, or at least reinforcement or clarification of existing rules, was announced in late 2016 and took effect on 1 September 2017.

This could have a significant impact on international schools and it remains to be seen whether this will affect the overall shape of the sector.

Under this regulation, all schools with Year 1-9 students who are Chinese nationals, regardless of the school’s status, must be able to demonstrate that they can conform to the government’s curriculum requirements for compulsory education.

Many schools had planned for this and put considerable efforts into designing curricula that can meet the national requirement and offer a distinctive international approach; those that did not plan in this way will have to make adjustments to curricula or take the decision to no longer admit Chinese nationals below Year 10.

This may also clarify the rule that Chinese families who return from abroad will not be able to attend expat schools unless they have a foreign passport. Previously such children had attended these schools despite not fulfilling the compulsory Chinese education.
VARIATION IN LEADERS’ ROLES

In addition to the three types of schools, there are a number of other factors that influence a leader’s role:

- **Regulation** The extent of influence of the provincial or national education ministry in the operation of the school. This may vary depending on the type of school, location, connections within the government, and its history – e.g. when and how the school was established. Local government, for example, may adjust regulations to support the setting up of a new school to attract inward investment or to develop a new commercial area.

- **Private or public sector** Public sector includes an international branch, programme or department within a prestigious state school. This could be based at a separate campus nearby and set up in partnership with an international education organisation.

- **For profit or not-for-profit** For profit includes Chinese investors and foreign joint ventures, franchises or other licensing arrangements. This may also include public sector schools with an element of profit paid to the international partner as a fee. Not-for-profit includes Chinese benefactors or certain international organisations and trusts.

- **International or bilingual curriculum** All schools, except expat schools, should be bilingual. However, there are variations in how integrated the Chinese and international curricula are. They may be integrated at all Years, for example, through each class being run by two co-teachers, or through alternating semesters. Alternatively, in Years 1-9 the focus may be on the Chinese curriculum with add-on English language lessons and tutoring, with the international curriculum only operating fully at Years 10-13.

This situation may develop further if schools adjust their approach to comply with the recent regulatory changes.

- **Licence** Linked to the previous points, most schools will either have a licence to enrol expats or Chinese nationals. There are some exceptions who have a special licence allowing the school to teach both.

- **Joint or single venture** Joint ventures (JVs) are usually between a Chinese owner and a foreign education company or school. The foreign organisation typically provides the teaching and learning expertise, while the Chinese partner provides the land and financial investment. JVs may have different arrangements and degrees of quality control or oversight by the education partner – for example, it could be more like a franchise with strict quality controls, financial stake and board membership, or more of a branding or licensing set-up.

- **Type of Chinese investor** There is a wide range of investors: from construction companies wishing to establish a school simply as a magnet for real estate buyers, to government-sponsored companies seeking to develop a region or attract inwards investment, to benefactors with long-established interest in education and nation building. Who the investor is and how s/he runs their organisation are absolutely key to the role of the school leader.

- **Student / parent nationalities** Bilingual schools are nearly all Chinese students, and many expat schools include a large number of Chinese children who have foreign passports. International education in China is therefore normally catering to Chinese people.
• **Dual leadership** In many (but not all) schools with an international head, there is a requirement to have another leader who is a Chinese national. Various designations are used in English for this second position, including co-principal and director general. Schools may also have a branch secretary of the Chinese Communist Party. This person represents the interests of Chinese staff members and may, in some cases, double as a co-principal.

The relationship between the expat and Chinese leaders varies considerably. In some cases, the international head is the clear school leader, with the Chinese principal in the background managing governmental relations and statutory responsibilities. In other cases, the two heads have a peer relationship and work closely together, or the Chinese principal will have primacy and the international head will have a delegated set of leadership responsibilities such as solely focusing on the international curriculum and expat staff.

• **Position of support staff and Chinese academic staff** In some schools these staff report into the expat leader (via Leadership Team members), in other schools support services are centralised, provided by an affiliated Chinese organisation, or the investor’s organisation. Similarly, Chinese academic staff may be managed separately either by design or in practice. This could mean that half, or even the majority, of staff are not within the head’s scope of responsibility.

• **Governance** There are examples of schools with clear governance structures, values and delegated authority, and others where the concept of governance does not exist – e.g. the owner runs the school just like any other business within their conglomerate.

• **New schools** Perhaps more than any other location, China is setting up new schools and looking for founding leaders. This inevitably means less predictability in all the above elements, in particular how things will operate in practice.

The above summary could perhaps inform questions to explore as part of a due diligence enquiry when considering a leadership role in China (see also page 44).
CATERING PRIMARILY FOR CHINESE CHILDREN

In many countries it is typical for international schools to be attended by local, host-country students. This is certainly true in China where the vast majority of students attending international schools are Chinese. Indeed, official numbers or school websites may understate the Chinese population since they exclude children from China who have obtained a foreign passport.

The key driver for the growth in international education in China is the aspiration of Chinese parents and students to obtain international qualifications to study at university abroad. Last year, for example, nearly 330,000 Chinese students studied in the USA. Ten years earlier this was just under 63,000 (ISC Research).

The Hurun Report (which presents research into, among others, China’s elites) reports that 80% of China’s wealthy families plan to send children abroad for part of their education.

Despite high fees, demand to attend an international school in China greatly outstrips supply. This is reflected in the number and rate of new schools opening and, perhaps also, the wide range of quality offered.

Whilst expat leaders may operate in very different circumstances in China, they are primarily required to achieve international curriculum exam success and, in particular, international university entrance. There is, therefore, one constant tension that all expat leaders have to manage, between the expectation to deliver this most important factor for the majority of Chinese families, and the broader, holistic aims that are typically associated with international education.

BILINGUAL SCHOOLS

There is an obvious tension between the desire for international education and the requirement for Chinese nationals to adhere to the Chinese curriculum in Years 1-9, i.e. the country’s compulsory education. International schools are able to comply by working with the authorities to demonstrate that the required curriculum is adequately covered alongside the international and co-curricular elements.

This adds a great deal of complexity in every aspect of the school – for example, in terms of planning, timetabling, staffing, coordination and teamwork.

“There is a seemingly insatiable demand from Chinese families for international education. Last year we had over 1,300 applications for our 25 places.”

“Our licence allows us to enrol both foreign and Chinese students - but we are 99% Chinese.”

“You have got to teach the Chinese curriculum but have limited timetable capacity to also teach other international curriculum or learn English. By the time you get to the 6th Form it’s too late and almost impossible to deliver what’s expected.”

“A bilingual curriculum can mean many different things. The two questions I always ask on student applications are: how many English lessons do you have each week, and how many lessons in English.”
FEATURES OF GOVERNMENT REGULATION

Importance

Perhaps the most important single feature for an international school to be workable in China is its relations with the government.

This may require attention at national, provincial and local level as well as addressing the parallel systems of communist party and state.

“If you have guanxi then anything is possible. If you don’t then nothing is possible.”

“Everything else is dispensable except the need to be well connected within the Communist Party.”

GUANXI

Literally translated as “gate links”, is the system of social networks and influential relationships which facilitate business and other dealings in China. It explains how trust exists and is built in China and the much greater importance of social and family connections in professional dealings.

Some leaders talked about the importance of a school being seen to work with the state, for example, supporting its plan to develop a particular locality. A mutually supportive relationship, rather than just complying with regulations.
Most leaders talked about who managed relations with the state, and in all cases it seems crucial for the school to have someone working within it or on its behalf who has the standing to manage this effectively.

“You need someone with some serious clout to make things happen. This is not about corruption. It is about connections and respect. It’s important in many parts of South East Asia with Chinese culture – but most of all in China.”

“We were opening our school in a couple of weeks and still had not got our licence. My colleague said not to worry – leave it with me. She then organised a meeting with the Minister of Education the next day which I attended. It was all sorted out in one day.”

The role of the head

Nearly everyone we spoke to identified a key individual in their organisation with responsibility for managing relations with the state. In some cases, such as larger education groups, this may be handled quite remotely from the expat head. In other cases, the head’s involvement may be limited and carefully choreographed. In only one case that we came across was this a large part of the head’s role.

“My Director of External Relations is the main person. Someone to translate, read and advise on the nuances of how to manage relationships – e.g. when meeting a group of people, who do I speak to first? However, our success is more about this person’s standing than her skills and experience.”

“There was a wide variation in the impact of government regulations. China has the largest education system in the world with a vast management organisation and several different levels of bureaucracy. It was clear from talking with different leaders that there was wide variation in how they saw the impact of government regulations on their school and their role as a leader. There was also a sense that the situation was changeable – for example with adjustments to the balance of power between central and provincial government.

This seems to be due, in part to the way in which Chinese law is applied through interpretation rather than precedent. We heard of one example where a new school was able to benefit from the creative bringing together of aspects found in three different laws to make a situation work in practice.

“The impact and application of regulations

“When investors approach schools in the UK for franchising opportunities, the first question the UK school should ask is ‘do you have the necessary connections?’

“Our group has a ‘Vice Principal CCP’ (China Communist Party) on the management team.”

“I have learnt how to drink a lot! I spend 3 nights per month – about 12 hours – socialising with local officials.”

“This is all handled by the investor family.”

“‘My group has a ‘Vice Principal CCP’ (China Communist Party) on the management team.’

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There is variation in how regulations impact schools and the level of this impact. In some cases, it was seen as a significant issue:

A traditional Chinese saying: “heaven is high and the emperor is far away” could be quoted to refer to local practice being different when the central state government is remote.

International schools operating as branches or programmes within the public sector itself are obviously in a different situation as regards involvement with the local authority.

From talking with different leaders explaining their different situations, we identified a number of factors that seem to influence the impact of government regulations on the running of the school and the role of its leader:

- location
- the school's connections within the government
- type of school and its licence
- history and date of establishment.
REQUIREMENT FOR DUAL LEADERSHIP

Most international schools have a designated Chinese leader in addition to the expat leader. However, this role varies greatly in design and practice.

In bilingual schools this role has obvious responsibility relating to the Chinese elements of the curriculum. This could extend to leading the Chinese staff – including all support staff. The Chinese leader could also represent the Chinese investor and therefore have great influence.

In some structures such as international branches within state schools or within Chinese school groups, the expat principal may report to a senior Chinese principal, or even two layers of Chinese principals.

In an expat school, the practice may well be for the dual leader to have a behind-the-scenes role and focus on managing governmental relationships. In this situation, the international head is likely to have more clearly delineated authority over the operations of the school, in line with the normal expectations of headship.

“I have three Principals, two of whom know almost nothing about education.”

“There is real danger that in some set-ups the Chinese principal runs the school and you are simply a puppet.”

“You may sit in the chair – but you don’t make the decisions. Your hands are tied and a lot of your effort is protecting your foreign staff.”

“I have six Principals in my school who are so high up they are not involved. Yesterday I was summoned to the Top Principal’s office – it was the third time I have seen her in 3 years.”

“The local education department needs to know who they are dealing with but we don’t have anyone designated as the Chinese principal.”
GOVERNANCE AND OWNERSHIP

In our report, The Art of International School Headship, when analysing the challenges of leading an international school, the most often mentioned challenge was governance.

In our discussions with leaders in China, we heard more about this challenge at some schools.

Variation between schools and leadership roles, a feature of this report, is perhaps especially marked when it comes to discussing the governance set-up.

Examples of good governance

We came across several examples of very effective governance structures with clear accountabilities and decision-making processes, alignment of values and long-term purpose, and delegated authority to the head.

Chinese investors

Many of the investors in schools we visited were extremely wealthy individuals for whom the school, although a huge investment, is a very small part of their portfolio. Their motivations for investing in a school seemed to vary. It could be about nation building and supporting the development of skills in China, or it may be much more about profit and supporting their main business interest.

A typical set-up is where the school is established as part of a much larger real estate development, as a magnet to attract people to buy property in that area. In these cases, the investor may know little about running a school, but may see it like another branch of the business. Their interest may be financial, with nearly all reporting and targets related to this. The head's remuneration, e.g. bonus, may be linked to these targets in the same way as other business leaders. Financial targets may be more detailed and ambitious than encountered before, with, for example, over 30% profit required (before depreciation and tax) as a percentage of revenue (a typical UK independent school charity may expect 5-10% operating surplus).

We also heard reports, although not at the schools we visited, of a tendency for some owners to buy and sell schools more quickly than in many other countries.
"I have never attended a board meeting. Decisions, including quite major issues, are handed down and communicated indirectly."

"There are more companies moving into education with no knowledge or experience of the sector. You get this elsewhere but perhaps even more in China."

"The investor owns nearly 50 businesses and made over 1 billion USD profit last year."

"My partners had no experience of running schools. They drew on their experience as parents – which was totally sincere and meaningful to them and included some healthy challenge."

"Nearly all discussions with the board are about financial targets, with detailed reporting in all areas."

"When setting up a new school it may actually be easier to work with an investment partner who doesn't have experience in schools. Your role as education expert may be more valued and you don't have to try to unwind pre-conceived notions about education."

"An investor may declare a wish to be in education, but will, for example, have no interest to be involved in any social programmes that educate lower classes. There is very clear profit motive and it's important that this is understood."

"The investor owns nearly 50 businesses and made over 1 billion USD profit last year."

**Chinese business leadership culture**

Successful Chinese business leaders have had to be particularly resourceful, flexible and adaptable to succeed in complex, fast-moving, environments. They are typically entrepreneurial, often founders/owners or their relatives, and are most used to operating in a top-down control style, with many direct reports and as wide a span of control as possible.

Although top-down, they may operate decentralised businesses each with its own organisation – a simple structure which favours growth and local agility over synergies and standardisation. It may be most akin to a trading mentality where speed, timing and practicality are more important than planning and perfection.

Heads may be expected to react very quickly and with limited notice – e.g. you may be asked to host and present to VIP visitors with almost no notice.

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Heads may be expected to react very quickly and with limited notice – e.g. you may be asked to host and present to VIP visitors with almost no notice.
It is interesting to consider how this style and culture could clash with how a typical international/western school is run – with an emphasis on planning, standards, alignment, order and rules. Perhaps more importantly, how this differs to concepts of good governance with emphasis on correct process and procedure, delegated authority to the head, management of risk and assurance rather than just getting things done.

“Interference from the board is common – it is a challenge in many proprietor schools, but seems to be even more so in China. The Chinese management style is very hands-on.”

“HR matters are not handled well. My contract runs out in about 6 weeks, but I still haven’t been told if it will be renewed. I don’t feel it’s conspiratorial – but it’s just not yet seen as urgent.”

“Like in many fast-growing countries there is a lot of chaos in how things get done. It’s seat-of-the-pants rather than ordered and planned.”

“You may be tasked with establishing and running the school, but you don’t actually make the decisions. This is particularly difficult because staff don’t understand this and you can’t say you disown decisions.”

“It’s a strange mixture of cold brutality and paternalism. Some people were fired without warning, but the boss took food round to the family’s house.”

“I was asked the day before to prepare a report for a major conference. Now I always have things ready in case of any last minute requests.”

“What we would see as a professional business culture is not yet there in many organisations.”

“Western thinking is more black and white – valuing clarity, rules and empowerment. Chinese is more yin and yang – much more about what fits that particular situation, with a tolerance for ambiguity and inconsistency.”

“Chinese owners may be less tolerant of the ebbs and flows that are a feature in some schools – such as changes in numbers and profits. Heads of proprietary schools typically don’t last as long as those which are not-for-profit boards.”

“The owner started out running a cottage industry. This grew and grew into a huge organisation but in many ways it is still run like a cottage industry. There is little thinking about HR practice or planning.”

Like in many fast-growing countries there is a lot of chaos in how things get done. It’s seat-of-the-pants rather than ordered and planned.

It is interesting to consider how this style and culture could clash with how a typical international/ western school is run – with an emphasis on planning, standards, alignment, order and rules. Perhaps more importantly, how this differs to concepts of good governance with emphasis on correct process and procedure, delegated authority to the head, management of risk and assurance rather than just getting things done.
CHINESE CULTURE - CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

As mentioned, international schools in China increasingly cater to Chinese students driven by the desire to attend university abroad. Official figures on the number of foreign students attending international schools and the diversity of nationalities quoted on expat school websites may mislead, since many are of Chinese origin who have lived abroad or obtained a foreign passport.

International schools are therefore often very Chinese-dominated in terms of student and parent culture.

In this report, we won’t attempt to describe or define Chinese culture, but we have highlighted a number of aspects which seem to create a tension between the expectations of families and the approach that is more typical in international education.

Perhaps the two key features emerging from our discussions with expat leaders were high expectations and hardworking discipline, supported by a number of cultural and demographic aspects in China:

- The one-child policy (up until 2015). The strong education ethic throughout many parts of Asia is, if anything, exaggerated by the one-child policy in China, where the aspirations and attentions of both parents and four grandparents are often focused on one child.
- Confucian principles with an emphasis on respect for work and discipline.

- The importance of “face” – politeness, respect and reciprocity mean that difficult conversations with parents or students to dampen unrealistic expectations may be less acceptable.
- Some leaders questioned whether a willingness to consider luck and chance amongst some Chinese also fuel unrealistic expectations?

“We have the hardest working children in the world.”

“I can’t tell you how many conversations I have had about Harvard. I diplomatically explain the statistics – the chances of getting in, but an interest in luck stops logic and face-saving gets in the way of real conversations.”

“We have guanxi kids – who come here because of who they are. There are very limited expectations for them to do well.”

“There are unbelievable pressures to succeed and every Chinese parent I know has completely unrealistic expectations. I sometimes feel my job is a ‘dream smasher’.”

RSACADEMICS

LEADING AN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL IN CHINA

FEATURES OF CHINA AND ITS INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS
In a collectivist society, there is a curiously heavy focus on the individual including, for example, with class rankings and the competition they create. Does a one-child policy perhaps also result in the idea that there is only one child who matters?

There is, therefore, intense engagement from Chinese parents, which is amplified by WeChat (social media). Some leaders we spoke to who had worked in several locations saw this aspect as perhaps the most extreme of any international school culture. Schools need to add resource to manage the complexity and effort in managing parents’ expectations.

With such high stakes, there is a whole industry around boosting students’ performance - both reputable (including tutoring) and disreputable (espionage, fake qualifications etc.).

“We have to change our entrance exam each year. Agents pay students to attend the exam and memorise separate portions of it which they collate and sell to applicants.”

“Our exam results transcript is redesigned so that it cannot be reproduced or forged.”

Chinese language

In many international education environments, an English-speaking head can take for granted that it will be possible to operate largely in English. In China, where the great majority of the international heads are English-speaking, this is not the case. Whilst we met international heads who speak Mandarin and see it as a huge advantage, those who do not, but who work in predominantly Chinese rather than international environments, face a significant challenge.

More than in many countries, therefore, communications with stakeholders need to be translated. In our earlier report, The Art of International Headship, we explore the challenges of cultural and language differences dealing with parents, students, board members and regulators, all of which are particular features of a school leader’s life in China. Some ways in which the language / culture barrier may impact the head’s role include:

- many opportunities for misunderstanding and conflict escalation
- additional time and resource needed for communications
- teamwork between expat and Chinese faculty – especially in a bilingual school
- challenges when it comes to engaging parents in a positive way
- the head being left out of the loop in high level discussions and decisions.
GROWTH AND SCALE

At the time of writing, China had just surpassed the UAE in having the greatest number of international schools and, given the insatiable demand by ambitious Chinese students and parents, this growth may well continue.

Some features of this growth include:

- Demand for expat leaders is outstripping supply. Some schools may employ leaders who are less experienced than ideal.
- Mixed quality of schools with many new ventures in untested locations run by organisations with very limited relevant experience.

“There are many fly-by-night operations that pop up and then disappear – it’s a problem in many countries but greatest in China.”

“The international education sector in China is exploding. It seems that all the world and his dog are opening schools in China.”

“We are part of a group where our sister school has over 5,000 students.”

“Many of the heads I meet here networking don’t seem to have the skills and experience for their job level. Add on to that the challenges of working in China and it’s a recipe for disaster.”
THE RIGHT STUFF FOR CHINA

In our report *The Art of International Headship*, we analysed information from over 100 school leaders, including 10 based in China, to identify the qualities needed to succeed in leading an international school. This can be summarised in the chart overleaf.

These success factors are all very relevant to China. In this report, we will try to build on our earlier report and identify more specific aspects that are particularly relevant to China.
### Strategies, priorities and focus

- Influence and engage diverse groups towards a unified school vision
- Manage upwards effectively
- Demonstrate an honest and open approach to build trust
- Take a ‘solutions focus’ to solving problems and resolving issues
- Focus on staff and recruitment
- Manage change effectively
- Build personal support and wellbeing

### Inclinations, types of intelligence and knowledge

- Cross-cultural competence
- Contextual intelligence
- Diplomacy
- Resilience and a sense of calm
- Empathetic, but also skillfully assertive when needed
- Technical Knowledge, international best practice pedagogy

### Hypotheses on type of person

- Self-belief and a strong vision guided by principles
- Integrity and authenticity
- Courage
- Self-development orientation
- Valuing advice, good at getting support
- Values difference and diversity
INSIGHTS FROM THE BUSINESS WORLD

It is interesting to consider research in the business world into expat leadership in China. Research involving 20 CEOs of multinational companies (MNCs) based in China identified a number of China-specific qualities needed for success.\(^4\) This was in addition to more general professional and global qualities that apply to leading a business abroad. The personal China qualities are summarised as:

1. Humility – be humble and avoid using authoritarian style
2. Strength – unyielding in defending core corporate values and culture
3. Patience – step-by-step works better than big bang
4. Speed – flexible and quick to operate in a business environment in constant, rapid flux
5. Guanxi-building – both internally and externally

Many of these aspects also were evident in the responses from the school leaders we met – particularly the first three. However, it is also worth considering some differences between leading an international school and leading the Chinese arm of an MNC:

- In an MNC, the expat leader is unlikely to report to a Chinese owner or board – they will report to the head office abroad. A school is often a different proposition. It is likely to be much more closely connected to its host country and culture and to feel more Chinese. As part of this, its hierarchy will be grounded in China, rather than in an international head office, and so managing upwards will be very different to the experience of many business leaders.

- Another aspect of this is that the expat business leader may need to take on a larger role in managing relations with the state, whereas the school leader is able to rely more on senior Chinese colleagues or investors. According to research published in the Harvard Business Review\(^3\), over half of multinational business CEOs in China spend 20-50% of their time coping with policy issues and dealing with the authorities.

- Expat staff in MNCs are likely to be a much lower percentage and confined to the senior ranks. Taking responsibility for the personal and professional wellbeing of expat staff in a school is likely to be a much more significant part of a leader’s role.
INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE IN CHALLENGING ENVIRONMENTS

Referring again to the multinational business research, it was interesting to note that many of the companies saw China as a destination for their most experienced and highest rated managers. China was seen by many as both a very important and challenging place to work, and certainly not a place for a first international posting.

“We require international experience, ideally in China, if not in Asia at the very least.”

Similarly, the school leaders we met emphasised the need for seasoned international leaders who can demonstrate resilience, coping and adaptability skills, gained, for example, from working in other Asian or developing countries.

“You need someone who is worldly wise and battle scarred.”

“If the school is a start-up, you look in China for someone who already knows the ropes.”

“You need someone who has demonstrated resilience and is low maintenance.”

“I had previously worked in two locations that presented a governance and management nightmare.”

“You never have the luxury of choosing the best from 10 candidates. You may only have one candidate so it’s more about vetting, and you need to be honest with people about the reality of the job and environment.”

“You need someone who is sympathetic to other cultures. You can read about this and say the right thing but it’s important to be able to demonstrate cultural acumen.”

“I always ask candidates ‘can you point to an experience in your personal or professional life which would give me confidence that you can be productive and positive in a challenging environment?”

“We require international experience, ideally in China, if not in Asia at the very least.”

It was interesting to hear heads’ views on how they would assess the suitability of their replacement, or decide whether expat teachers are likely to succeed:
ATTITUDE AND OUTLOOK

Perhaps the two most common words to describe successful school leaders in China that we heard were flexible and adaptable. People also described the need for a healthy philosophy in which leaders recognise the limits of their control and authority. These, depending on the set-up at the school, could be very different to a leader in other countries. Heads need to be able to work within these restrictions rather than fight against them. They need to be able to not take this personally and remain positive.

This is amplified further in the large number of new and recently established schools. Successful leaders often need to be what was once described to us as ‘institutionally flexible’. You often don’t know how the organisation is going to operate in practice until you are established within it, and you need to be able to read the organisation and adapt to work successfully within it.

"God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

_The “Serenity Prayer”, Reinhold Niebuhr_
POLITICALLY ASTUTE AND ORGANISATIONALLY SAVVY

Many leaders find themselves in very unfamiliar, Chinese organisations. There are exceptions but, depending on the school set-up, there are a number of factors which combine to make situations, people and decisions difficult to understand and read. Factors such as the role of the state, guanxi, the Chinese principal, predominance of Chinese children and parents, indirect communications, and unclear governance and lines of authority.

“A good preparation for my job is watching ‘House of Cards’.”

“There is a real danger that the administration part of the school which reports separately could undermine you. You need to get them in line but show respect. Be completely neutral and objective, with no favourites.”

“It has been a hell of a four years but I have come through. I am one of only two people who have ever survived.”

“My experience in student politics has stood me in good stead. Each year all staff get to vote on my headship as part of my appraisal against a long list of criteria. This follows something akin to a hustings meeting. I need to get 70% overall approval.”

“Never threaten to resign!”

“We have other schools within the same group who are poaching our students.”

“You can’t trash the board, but then you can’t defend the indefensible. A lot of my job is focussed on trying to protect the team.”

“We are other schools within the same group who are poaching our students.”

“Your positional authority is much more questionable than in other leadership situations.”
CROSS-CULTURAL COMPETENCE

This was a factor described in our report, *The Art of International School Headship*, and summed up as an ability to understand people from different cultures and engage with them effectively.

International school leaders in China need to manage a diverse staff and, in some cases, a diverse student and parent population. However, most international schools are very Chinese with a predominance of Chinese students, parents, owners, support staff and, depending on the curriculum, a significant proportion of Chinese academic staff. Without overlooking the diversity of nationalities, it is this Chinese cultural competence that was most often mentioned in our research.

Compared with many international working environments, we detect that China can be less forgiving if you are culturally insensitive, and a place where trust, based on guanxi, is harder to build. In addition there is, as mentioned earlier, for the vast majority of expat leaders, a significant language barrier with many of the schools’ Chinese stakeholders.

Particular cross-cultural competence factors in China include:

- a real interest and enthusiasm for learning about China
- an acceptance of, rather than just a tolerance of, the usual western criticisms of China (e.g. censorship)
- showing humility, patience and seeking consensus, avoiding imposing your views and national ways of working
- being tuned in to the need to build networks and trust, and the importance of “face”.

“There is a rising tide of national pride. Cultural faux pas may be met with limited tolerance.”

“You need to consider carefully how you manage local staff and the importance of giving face and guanxi. I found out I was upsetting staff because I was culturally insensitive.”

“Building trust is a key challenge.”

“The SLT here expect consensus decision making. The Chinese expect this.”

“We have a very multicultural faculty with different attitudes to curriculum. I need to appreciate these differences but align people around a core set of beliefs.”

“You need to be open minded and want to embrace the new culture. You need to be interested. A ‘Little Englander’ will not last five minutes.”

“You don’t promote UK values. You must be sensitive and humble to the Chinese mentality. They are open to questions around pedagogy and you should be open to such debates.”

“There is a rising tide of national pride. Cultural faux pas may be met with limited tolerance.”

“You need to be genuinely interested in China and drawn to the things there that are positive. If you can’t see past issues such as human rights or censorship, for example, then you are going to struggle. You can’t change the status quo, so you have got to really want to work within it.”
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- Market positioning
- Pupil recruitment
Satisfaction and perception surveys for parents, staff and pupils

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SUPPORT FOR LEADERS

PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

Depending on the type of school, many leaders find themselves in very unfamiliar situations and need to find support and be skilled at receiving advice.

From our conversations with leaders, some key aspects which were seen as most useful if established, or most desired if missing, were:

- bilingual support staff who cannot only interpret language but provide insights into cultural nuances
- someone who has standing with the Chinese state to help manage this key relationship
- board members from the education partner (e.g. international education organisation)
- Chinese staff in senior support positions
- senior Chinese staff who understand western education.

“The board needs others who are representing the views of the franchisor, the brand, to support the head in ensuring the right balance between profit and education.”

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“Bilingual support staff is very important. My PA has been invaluable.”
“One thing I am missing is a Chinese, western educated colleague who can help explain to parents the differences in Chinese vs western pedagogy. Someone who can help build greater trust between the school and parents. Chinese parents send their children here but do they really trust the organisation?”

“I have a good Board who remain strategic, not operational.”

“All our key support positions are Chinese – the CFO, HR Director and of course my PA. This makes a huge difference.”

“I involve people and take on multiple points of view.”

“I surround myself with good people. My philosophy is to employ people who are smarter than me. I have an excellent Leadership Team and rely particularly on the DH and CFO.”

**PERSONAL SUPPORT**

Some organisations, perhaps especially groups of schools, are very used to relocating senior staff and their families to China and have a tried and tested process. Other organisations may offer high financial allowances but expect you to organise more aspects yourself.

As part of our research we interviewed the International Mobility Manager in Shanghai working in a leading multinational company with thousands of expats worldwide, to understand how their practice and policy apply to senior leaders in China. Perhaps this could be seen as the gold standard benchmark.

Their personal support and relocation package is shown overleaf.

In terms of our school leaders, the key aspects of the package most mentioned relate to housing, a driver and schooling for children. Other induction aspects which were appreciated included language lessons and how the organisation took care of all the personal administration related to relocation, to ensure that the new head was able to concentrate on the job.
Example of relocation benefits for expat managers transferring to China

**Before**
- Look-see visit: one week visit to China for employee and spouse. This would be before the decision to relocate is finalised.
- Cultural induction training for employee, spouse and family – e.g. a one-day session back in home country. Includes both business as well as social, community and living aspects.
- Language training for employee and spouse – could start before assignment and continue while in China.
- Education consultant to gauge best education fit and advise on school choice.
- Informal buddy system organised with work colleague and family.

**Mobilisation**
- 20-foot container shipped.
- Visa advice and administration for employee and family.
- Medical check, advice and immunisations as required for employee and family.
- Flights with additional baggage allowance.
- Temporary accommodation if needed.

**On assignment**
- House hunting advice.
- Fully-furnished accommodation with utilities paid. Option to also choose unfurnished and transport furniture.
- Car with driver (employee is not allowed to drive).
- Full medical benefits in home and/or China (including family).
- Annual trip home per year (including family).
- Schooling in China or, in certain circumstances, in home country.
- Local living allowance – linked to cost of living and dislocation.
- Tax advice and support in completing returns.
With the schools we spoke to, in general, we detected that induction into the job itself and familiarisation with the school was done better than other aspects of induction to China – e.g. cultural awareness and language training. Based on a very small sample, this may be one area where multinational businesses are ahead of schools.

“Don’t overlook the importance of having a lovely apartment, driver for you and your spouse. You need to be well looked after and happy at home.”

“When you think of the money a school spends in recruiting and paying a new head, and the investment in the school, they shouldn’t skimp on support for the leader.”

“One issue you mustn’t overlook is that your children cannot attend a bilingual school – so you need to consider other options.”

“In an expat school, it’s a huge advantage to be married and have children of school age attending the school. It’s important PR and helps you be much more connected to the school. I sense that often people who leave are not in this situation.”

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“I had a good professional induction but poor personal induction. I felt I had a good understanding of the school but very little about the local political context.”

“My organisation was very experienced at bringing expat leaders in. There was tremendous support: financial, housing, shipping, visa etc.”

“I was able to concentrate on the job and put together a 90-day plan which ensured I was visible and quickly engaging with the school.”

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WHY DO THINGS GO WRONG?

LEADERS FIND THEMSELVES IN UNWORKABLE SITUATIONS

It is easy to see how aspects described in the section ‘Features of China and its international schools’ could combine to create huge challenges. Examples include:

- dysfunctional governance with unclear and undelegated decision-making, and a chaotic lack of planning
- investors who don’t understand education and/or have unrealistic expectations about what can be achieved
- lack of shared values, ethos and long term commitment on behalf of the owners
- unqualified Chinese principal calling the shots
- limited influence over support services or dysfunctional teamwork between expat and Chinese staff
- unable to achieve international university entrance due to inadequate international curriculum time and resources in Years 1-9 because of the demands of the Chinese curriculum
- unrealistic expectations from parents, students and investors
- the school’s (e.g. the investors’) lack of connections and influence with the state.

"Nearly 80% of the Principals in my school group have left in the last 2½ years – that’s over 20 people."
Many of the leaders we met saw the main reason for early departures of heads as the seemingly impossible situations in which leaders find themselves.

“You can have situations where the only thing good is the salary. The school may have a timetable that is 70-80% Chinese curriculum with no extracurricular activities, the school is dominated by a Chinese principal, there is huge staff turnover, an unrealistic salary cap means you can only attract backpacker teachers, and silos operating between the expat and Chinese staff. When you add in the problems of living in a strange country then everything multiplies and soon the head leaves.”

“You may find out that you have no control at all over areas such as finance and admissions which are all support services provided by the owner’s people.”

“The way some schools are set up you know it’s going to be a disaster. An impossible situation for any leader. The reason so many school leaders leave is because they find themselves in impossible situations.”

“You can have everything correct from a corporate governance perspective and have empowered leaders, but it still goes wrong for other reasons and you end up with a high turnover of heads.”

“It’s almost like a gang culture at the top of my organisation with people consolidating their position and building power through nepotism. A lot of communication is indirect or oblique. There is very little interaction and, in particular, little actual discussion. However, absolute loyalty is expected – you could never, for example, be open about applying for other jobs.”
WHY DO THINGS GO WRONG?

WRONG PERSON APPOINTED

The growth of Chinese international schools is resulting in the demand for leaders outstripping the supply. Schools, perhaps especially with owners who have limited experience in education, may make mistakes in hiring the wrong type of leader. They may value prestige and status over adaptability to the environment.

OWNERS MAKE MISTAKES VALUING PRESTIGE AND STATUS OVER ADAPTABILITY

“Many owners overplay the importance of finding a head with caché or prestige and underplay the need for intercultural competence. They find a big overseas head who does not have the characteristics to succeed in a very different environment.”

“If you pluck a successful head from the UK they may not last five minutes.”

“The very wealthy owners want the high profile head but they also want to direct this person and be in control. It’s a dilemma that can lead to failure.”

“People chase money. They are not ready for the challenge.”

“In the end it worked out okay, but both the school and I were very lucky! I didn’t have a clue what I was doing. I was selected for a job I really was not ready for!”

“Many leaders find themselves in a precarious position. They have been selected for a position without the necessary experience. The board is hugely focused on profit. You find this everywhere, but a particular feature in China due to the size of the market.”

“A big mistake owners make is ‘better the devil you know’ – they promote a deputy head who is not ready. They are too swift to promote internally.”

“The ‘trophy head’ could work with a very externally-focused role, fundraising etc. but only if there is a deputy who is able to run the school.”
LACK OF DUE DILIGENCE

A key conclusion from this report is the huge range of situations in which leaders of international schools in China can find themselves. It is quite possible for two leaders working in, what seem on the face of it, similar types of schools, to have very different experiences based on the subtleties of how the school is set up and the values and behaviours of the key players.

In the next section of this report we explore this requirement for due diligence further and include a possible checklist of questions to ask and requests which leaders may wish to make.

In the opinion of several leaders we met, this lack of due diligence was clearly a contributing factor in early departures.

“You need to really understand the situation, what you are being asked to do and is it feasible.”

Understand the nature of the relationship with the foreign brand. See the contract between the Chinese investor and the foreign school. In my case this had to be renegotiated.”

“Get a Chinese-speaking lawyer to check your contract. Insist on clarity that you will be able to run the school.”

“Ask for a longer lead time before starting at the school, especially if it is a new school.”

“You need to know what connections the school has with the state.”

“Find out what level of investment is going to be put back into the school.”

“How are people valued – what for example is spent on CPD, what support is provided?”

“Use your contacts to look into the background of your partners / investors / owners. Find out everything you can from difference sources.”

“It sounds obvious, but make sure you visit the school before agreeing to anything! I know of examples where people take the job without seeing the school.”

“Is the school ring-fenced financially from the rest of the owner’s business? For example, when another business goes under will this result in additional cost cutting at the school?”

“As a UK brand, we only get involved in schools we understand – this means UK curriculum in English. We have decided not to consider bilingual schools at all.”

“What are the partners’ values? These may be expressed in a way that is convenient for hooking the fish but then not sustained in practice. Things change.”

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UNABLE TO ADAPT SUFFICIENTLY

As mentioned earlier, the people we met saw the most critical personal characteristic for success in China as the ability to adapt and be flexible. Some leaders perhaps, especially those hired due to their success in a very different or domestic environment, may be unable to adapt to China.

“Some people don’t know when to keep their mouth shut! Working in an HMC school in the UK doesn’t prepare you for that.”

“You can’t tell people to do things – it’s much more about influence and advice.”

“The biggest mistake is to see the school in China as an extension of your home country operation. You need to be flexible and adaptable to make it work.”

“When things have gone wrong, it’s mainly been down to my poor communication. Where I haven’t made sure that everyone understands what we are doing and why.”

“You don’t want someone who’s going to come just with their own ideas and not be sensitive and willing to learn.”

“The last thing you want is some high quality domestic heads fail here because they try to impose their way of doing things.”

“Some people don’t make any effort to learn.”
Moving to a new job always involves a risk and you can never be absolutely sure of what you are letting yourself in for. However, when considering an international school leadership position in China this would appear to be even more the case given the variety of schools and leadership situations.

We have collected together ideas, comments and questions raised in our research to create a possible checklist to help inform what type of leadership position exists. This checklist may be of equal relevance to those setting up a new school and considering the leadership structure and recruitment.

We should also recognise, however, that things change. For example, the governance of a new school may mature as the owner releases the reins and recognises the value of more specialists on the board; the relationship with the state regulator may change in line with new regulations or a change in personnel.
### State Regulations

- What relationship does the school have with the state – in particular within the Chinese Communist Party?
- Who is the key individual in the school in this respect, and what is their relationship with the state based on?
- What role does the head play in managing relationships with the state?
- In a typical month how much time might be spent by the head on regulations?
- Who in the school manages the detail of regulatory compliance?

### Governance

- Who are the investors and partners, what is their background, motivation and values?
- How many different sources of information do you have on the investors and partners?
- To what extent are school finances separate from other parts of the investor’s business?
- How much money is re-invested into the school?
- What are the key provisions of the contract between the Chinese partner and foreign school / international organisation?
- What does your contract say about your role and degree of authority?

### Due Diligence Checklist

#### Governance Cont.

- Is there a governance structure in place?
- How does governance operate in practice – e.g. compared with typical guidance on international school governance from COBIS or CIS – e.g. purpose, membership, responsibilities, rules, relationship with head?
- Who in the school is related to the investor?
- Who on the board understands education?

#### Bilingual Curriculum (Years 1-9)

- How many hours per week are taught in English?
- How many English lessons?
- How are the curricula integrated – e.g. through co-teaching?
- How is the bilingual curriculum regulated and assessed by the state?
- Do Chinese staff teach in English?
- How much time is allocated to co-curricular activities?
- How are Chinese and expat academic staff managed (e.g. reporting lines, teamwork, professional development)?
### DUE DILIGENCE CHECKLIST

**CHINESE PRINCIPAL**
- Is there a Chinese principal?
- What is his/her background?
- What is his/her role – e.g. which staff report in, who does s/he report to? What does s/he spend time on?

**STAFF**
- Key facts about staff – e.g. qualifications (are they on the website, if not, why?), turnover / tenure, nationalities.
- CPD – time or budget
- Who do support staff report to?
- Mix of Chinese and expat staff
- How many Chinese staff are western educated?
- How many Chinese staff are bilingual?
- What restrictions are there on staff salaries?

**STUDENTS**
- Mix of nationalities, how many foreign passport holders are of Chinese origin?
- Which type of Licence does the school have?
- Class sizes

**EXPECTATIONS**
- What are the targets – e.g. for pupil numbers and growth. How realistic are these given the location of the school and the local market?
- What is the lead time to establish something new – how realistic is this and what assumptions are made?
- Which accreditations does the school have? Which is it aiming for? By when?

**TERMS AND CONDITIONS**
- Can you arrange for a bilingual lawyer to review your contract?
- Which benefits and support apply to your family, which to you only?
- In which currency is your salary calculated and where is it paid?
- How is tax dealt with on pay and benefits (in home and China)?
- Do you get tax advice and help completing tax returns?
CONCLUSION

Opportunities for international education in China would seem to hold no bounds. Every week we hear of a new plan for expansion and we, at RSAcademics, are increasingly involved in helping schools fulfil those plans and find the right leadership candidates.

However, it would seem that the only answer to “what is it like leading an international school there?” is: “it depends...”

The features of China and its international schools, combined with the numbers and growth of new schools, means perhaps more variety of leadership situations than anywhere else.

There are clearly huge career and investment opportunities, accompanied by a need to understand the nuances of context in order for leaders to succeed and their schools to flourish.

We hope that this report has thrown more light on the leadership of international schools in China and will provide helpful background to those planning to work or invest there.

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About the author

Barry Speirs, Head of Leadership Consultancy at RSAcademics, has a long international career in HR, leadership development and employee relations for multinational companies and now specialises in leadership training, development and headship appraisals in schools. He is also the author of The Art of International Headship.

You can download other free research reports and guides, as well as find out more about our Ten Trends reports, on our website: www.rsacademics.co.uk/publications

If you are interested in how RSAcademics can support you or your organisation in international education in China, please visit www.rsacademics.co.uk

Alternatively, you can contact our international team:

Russell Speirs is CEO of RSAcademics and has personally worked with hundreds of schools providing strategic consultancy and advice to boards, heads and senior leaders. A graduate of Sevenoaks School, Oxford University and The European School of Management, and a Governor of a 3-18 (K12) school in Europe, Russell has a passion for international education. He leads our world-class team of specialists to support the development of schools in the UK and internationally.

russellspeirs@rsacademics.co.uk

Aaron Ashton is Head of International Leadership Appointments and has been privileged to advise on the executive search and selection of over one hundred school leaders across the world. If you are looking for the right leader to join your international school, or you are interested in finding out about school leadership appointments in China and worldwide, contact Aaron directly.

aaronashton@rsacademics.co.uk