



8 Reasons why international schools will be your fast track to study abroad

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1 Teaching style

You can gain a sense of the style of teaching international schools tend to advocate by taking a glimpse at their classroom arrangements. Often, each room accommodates up to 20 students, with desks set up either in lines or in circular hubs, which are designed to facilitate discussion based, student-centred learning. Teachers often play the role of “facilitators”, encouraging students to interact and work towards individual learning outcomes.

The international school way of teaching also aims to develop transferrable skills such as teamwork, public speaking and creativity. Students are encouraged to express themselves and show what they have learned in different ways, including through oral presentations and group project work. These skills are also valuable preparation for later university interviews, especially if planning to study overseas, and for encounters in the real world.



2 Grading system

One aspect parents and students generally appreciate is the grading system, which helps in gauging academic progress and all-round improvement. Besides giving “attainment grades”, international schools often use “effort grades” as well, so that students, especially those in need of boost to self-esteem, see that their industry is being recognised.

In recent years, schools have begun to adopt a more western approach to praise, with comments in reports tending to accentuate the positive. Certain local schools in Hong Kong are sometimes said to mark on the low side to “motivate” students to try harder. In contrast, grades assigned at international schools are seen to be more reflective of actual ability and achievements.

3 Extracurricular activities

Most schools now offer a wide array of extracurricular activities. These generally include team sports, music and drama, outdoor excursions, overseas trips and community service. Such opportunities give all students the chance to develop personal interests and passions, which broadens their horizons and, in the longer term, enhances future university applications. Admissions panels at top global institutions, especially in the US, often look beyond grades to detect instead what kind of contributions candidates will make to campus life and the wider community.



4 International exposure with a local touch

Families hoping for an "east meets west" education system can find schools in Hong Kong which offer an international curriculum complemented by lessons in Putonghua. Separate classes are geared to the different levels of native and non-native Chinese speakers. The student mix is often more diverse than in other cities, given the high proportion of expatriates in Hong Kong, potentially allowing students to interact with peers from around the world.

5 Senior curriculum choice

Most international schools in Hong Kong use the International Baccalaureate (IB) system, though a few offer UK-based A-Levels or other national options, for instance for their French or German streams. When considering a switch of school, families should therefore think ahead and carefully evaluate which senior curriculum will be most suitable for their child's future path. Ultimately, the grades achieved will significantly affect prospects for acceptance at university, especially in the UK where academic grades are the main criteria for admission.

The IB curriculum requires students to take a broad range of subjects, covering the humanities and sciences. A-Levels allow more specialisation. That said, both systems are well recognised globally and have a solid track record for consistent grading. As a result, teachers should be familiar with the grading requirements and, therefore, able to offer appropriate guidance.

Since the IB requires English and maths into the final year, it is particularly beneficial for those applying to US colleges which expect candidates to sit compulsory aptitude tests, such as the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) and American College Testing (ACT), with a focus on those two subjects.



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Subject exposure and choice

Both the IB and A-Levels systems offer a wide choice of subjects, including environmental science for the former and psychology, art, music, business studies, sociology and politics for the latter. This opens doors for students who are already developing clear career interests or know early on that they want to study, say, architecture at university, where a background in art can be an advantage.

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Flexibility of destinations

Students often consider several countries when looking at university options and plan to make a final decision after receiving offers. Attending an international school usually allows for the flexibility to pursue options in different parts of the world.

Some parents think a move to a UK or US boarding schools will automatically enhance prospects for university admission. But they should also remember that the UK system may be overly focused on the academic aspects, which may limit the chances of getting into a US university – and vice versa. The US system may not be conducive to giving students the academic strengths expected by top UK institutions such as Oxford or Cambridge. Regarding universities in Hong Kong, an international school curriculum qualifies students to apply through the non-JUPAS route, the same as for overseas applicants.

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Support for university applications

Most international schools have professional counsellors to advise students on career options and to offer support and guidance when applying to overseas universities. This extends to assistance with writing statements, taking aptitude tests, building personal profiles, supplying letters of recommendation and monitoring each step of the application process. Those considering tertiary education overseas can expect a high level of support at international schools which are well versed in the nuances of the various systems.

Understandably, such schools also tend to have a higher proportion of students applying to overseas institutions. As a result, they regularly host university representatives for talks about admissions and maintain an active dialogue to have the latest news and insights.

Of course, each student's personality and aspirations are different. Some have a "growth" mindset, meaning they are more naturally suited to taking on new challenges and are ready to step out of their comfort zone. Others have more of a "fixed" mindset, with a personality and preferences which reflect that accordingly. In each case though, it is up to the school to identify strengths and allow them to be further developed. ■