

## Education as an international export: Marketing elite, English schools as franchises overseas

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*A growing portion of international schools are franchised branches of schools originally founded in other countries. The first of such schools opened in 1996 and there are now almost 100 globally. Expansionist schools are primarily elite, English private schools, with concentrations of their franchises developing in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and East Asia over the past quarter of a century—particularly in mainland China over the past decade. This study explores how such schools adapt the language and focus of their marketing and, in doing so, sustain their privilege across various contexts. A qualitative textual analysis is conducted of the websites of 11 schools run by Dulwich College and Harrow School, the first brands to expand overseas and with the most extensive networks of schools today. A lens of international schools as enclosures of privilege is used to demonstrate how schools adapt themselves and their framing. The study finds the promotional focus of the schools depends not just on whether they are the founding school or a franchise, but also on their relative ages, and on their varying locations within specific sociocultural contexts. An emergent hybrid model, catering to both local and international curricula, blends the local with the global and complicates the conventional notion of the international school. Finally, the study suggests that further research is focused on the franchising of elite education, particularly as the focal point of expansion begins to shift away from the mainland Chinese boom of the past decade.*

*Keywords: international education, international schools, school expansion, elite education, overseas franchise schools*

### Introduction

In 1572, Queen Elizabeth I granted a royal charter opening Harrow School in north London (Tyerman, 2000). Just some decades later in 1619 and on the other side of the city, Dulwich College was founded (Blanch, 1877). The schools' long histories, notable alumni, and strong academic records—as well as some of the highest fees in England—have made them both prominent and illustrious names within a busy market for private secondary schools in the UK (Peel, 2021). Both were also the first anglophone schools, hundreds of years later, to expand transnationally in the form of overseas franchise schools.

Dulwich pioneered the trend by opening a franchise in Phuket, Thailand in 1996, with Harrow opening in Bangkok in 1998 (Bunnell, 2008a). Today, there are over 73 franchise schools opened by primarily English institutions (Bunnell et al., 2020), but Dulwich and Harrow remain the two schools with the greatest overseas presence. Whilst both schools have been well established in the UK for centuries, there has yet to be focused research into how they might translate their reputation and appeal to remain high-status options both across new cultural contexts and in spite of their expansion widening access to their brand names.

With this emergent trend “operating within the periphery of the blurred field of ‘international schools’” (Bunnell, 2008a, p. 384), so far there has been little scholarly attention paid to the overseas franchises of elite, anglophone schools. Research looks more generally at international schooling (Hayden & Thompson, 1995; Pearce, 2013), or at the further developed “parallel phenomenon” (Bunnell, 2008a, p. 384) of transnational expansion in higher education (Becker, 2010; Farrugia & Lane, 2013; Healey, 2015; Kosmützky & Putty, 2016; Lane, 2011; Merola, 2016; Wilkins & Huisman, 2012, 2015). Studies have mostly documented the extent of schools’ transnational expansion and, at times, the motivations behind it (Bunnell, 2008a; Bunnell et al., 2020). As such, there has yet to be any systematic comparison of the ways in which founding and franchise schools situate themselves within various contexts and appeal to diverse groups of elite consumers.

The success of franchise schools is evidenced by their growth, though it remains to be seen how they portray themselves as places of privilege, and particularly how they do so in markets already saturated with local schools and competing, independent international schools. This paper uses textual content analysis to explore how Harrow School and Dulwich College frame themselves as places of privilege to parents in their various locations. This focused exploration of how elite names—with considerable heritage and strong reputations in the UK—portray themselves to new consumers contributes to an understanding of the ways in which privilege is managed and sustained across varied contexts in an increasingly global education market.

The primary research question of this study is: How do Dulwich College and Harrow School frame themselves as places or “enclosures” of privilege by way of appealing to prospective parents and students? The study’s secondary questions are: (1) What are the similarities and differences in this framing between the original, founding schools, and the newer franchises overseas? and (2) What are the similarities and differences between franchises in various locations?

## **Background**

The origins of international schooling, according to the International School Consultancy, date back at least to the 19th century: 10 of over 1,300 schools registered with the Council of International Schools were founded before 1900 (Hayden & Thompson, 1995; Pearce, 2013). International schooling began on a small scale, offering education in home languages and systems for the children of diplomats and expatriates. In the past 50 years, this narrow consumer base has broadened, with the sector seeing its most pronounced growth in recent decades. In January 2007, there were 4,563 international schools globally. By October 2019, there were 11,320 such schools educating

5.7 million students worldwide (Bunnell, 2008b). Growth has been particularly pronounced in Asia, driven by rising incomes and demand for English language education. In 2000, Hong Kong had 92 international schools. By 2017, it had 176. Over the same period, Thailand went from 12 international schools to 121 (Machin, 2017). Other estimates suggest the number of international schools across Asia grew by 334% between 2000 and 2007 (Brummitt, 2007).

Alongside rapid growth, international schooling has seen a much-widened consumer base of both expatriate and local students seeking a globalised outlook and internationally recognised qualifications (Hayden & Thompson, 2008). International schools, and the qualifications they offer (such as the International Baccalaureate program), are increasingly seen as a status symbol and a marker of distinction, as much for local students as for expatriates (Gardner-McTaggart, 2018). There is an appeal especially for local elites who perceive domestic alternatives to be inferior (Hayden & Thompson, 2008) and for those aiming for overseas higher education (Ng, 2012). International schools often differentiate between themselves and their local counterparts and maximise the perceived relative prestige of attending their institution by framing their students as cosmopolitan global citizens (Berting, 2010; Garton, 2003; Reid & Ibrahim, 2017). These schools can take several forms, such as “Internationally British” or “Internationally American” (Wu & Koh, 2022, p. 57), referring to elements of practice or curricula used by the school, as well as the makeup of its staff. A growing minority of these schools, however, are the franchised versions of anglophone schools usually established in England (Bunnell et al., 2020).

The most comprehensive review of such schools is offered by Bunnell (2008a) and Bunnell et al. (2020), who suggest expansion of franchised international schools has occurred in three distinct waves. The first wave was characterised by “opportunistic and ad hoc” expansion (Bunnell, 2008a, p. 386), described as a form of hyper-capitalism. High-status schools expanded into low-risk markets, demonstrated by strong local demand for flourishing, independent international schools. Dulwich and Harrow’s first expansions in 1996 and 1998 were followed by two more elite English schools, Bromsgrove and Shrewsbury, also in Thailand in 2002 and 2003.

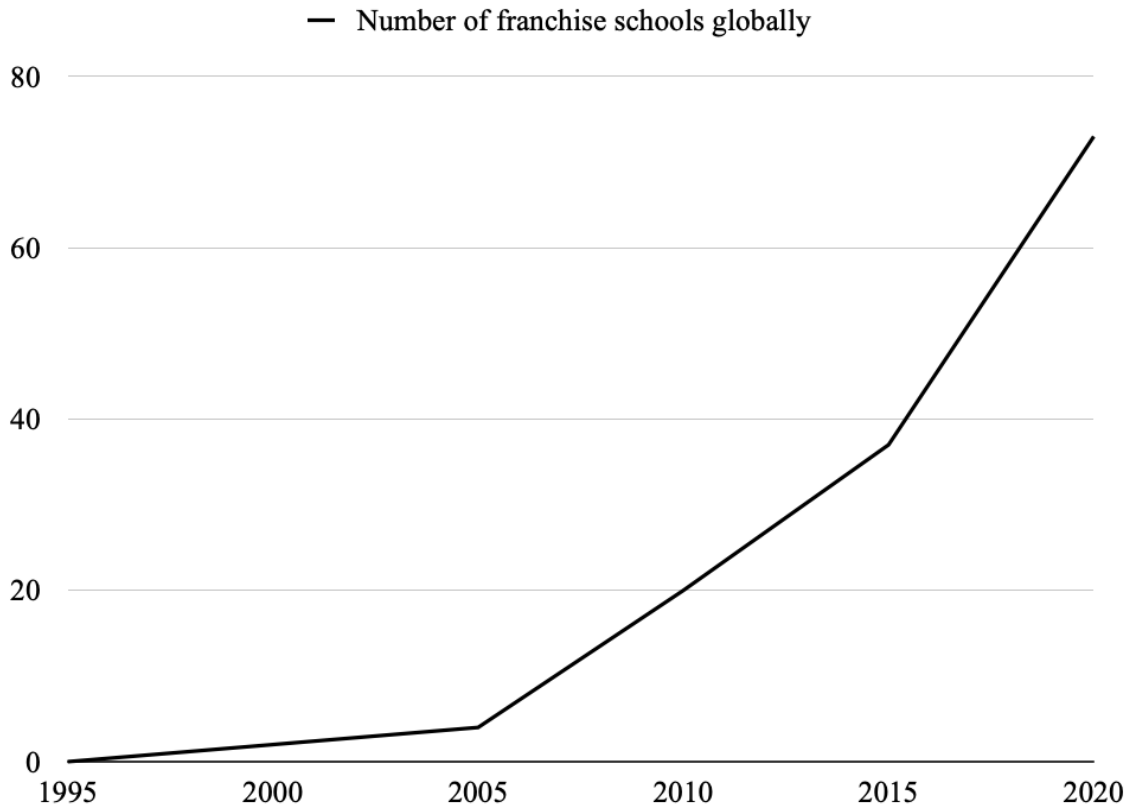
The second wave moved from opportunism to systematic growth. Schools were pushed by financial pressures at home to look for new sources of revenue when the Charities Act of England and Wales 2006 threatened the charity status of private schools: schools now needed to prove they were working in the interest of the public good if they were to continue receiving tax breaks of more than £100 million between them (Bunnell, 2008a). This put pressure on schools to subsidise more places for low-income students in England. Subsequently, the second wave saw further growth and the involvement of lesser-known brands in new places, such as Repton School and Oxford High School for Girls in Dubai, and Haileybury schools in both Almaty and Astana, Kazakhstan.

A third wave, pushed by a growing global education industry, has been even more extensive, with a greater spread of ‘second tier’ cities and schools (Verger et al., 2017). A handful of American, Canadian, and Scottish schools have opened franchises, although the majority remain English. Openings in Chinese cities such as Qingdao, Suzhou, and Wuxi—as well as the opening of a Dulwich College in Yangon, Myanmar in

2018—reflect the reach of expansion beyond major cities, such as Beijing, Hong Kong, and Singapore (Bunnell et al., 2020). In 2019, the UK Department for International Trade knew of over 120 further overseas projects being considered by British schools (Jack, 2019). Concentrations of franchise schools found in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and East Asia reflect regional variations in economic development, demand for English schooling, and the ease of establishing franchises (Hayden & Thompson, 2008). Figure 1 shows the extent of the growth of franchise schools globally between 1995 and 2019.

**Figure 1.**

*Growth in franchise schools globally from 1995 to 2020.*



Source: Bunnell et al. (2020)

As the two pioneers of transnational school expansion, Dulwich and Harrow have had the weight of their histories and brand names behind them, with the cachet of their names allowing them to expand extensively. Both schools are members of the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference (HMC), a group "comprising the oldest, richest and most prestigious schools" in the UK (Peel, 2021, p. 11). Harrow is also one of 18 members of the Rugby Group, as well as the even more prestigious Clarendon Commission of seven schools reformed by the Public Schools Act of 1868 (Bunnell et al.,

2020)<sup>1</sup>. As an indicator of the prestige and privilege of these schools, consider that “Clarendon school alumni remain 94 times more likely to take up an elite position [as measured by wealth, occupation, and/or influence on public life] than individuals attending other schools” (Reeves et al., 2017, p. 1160).

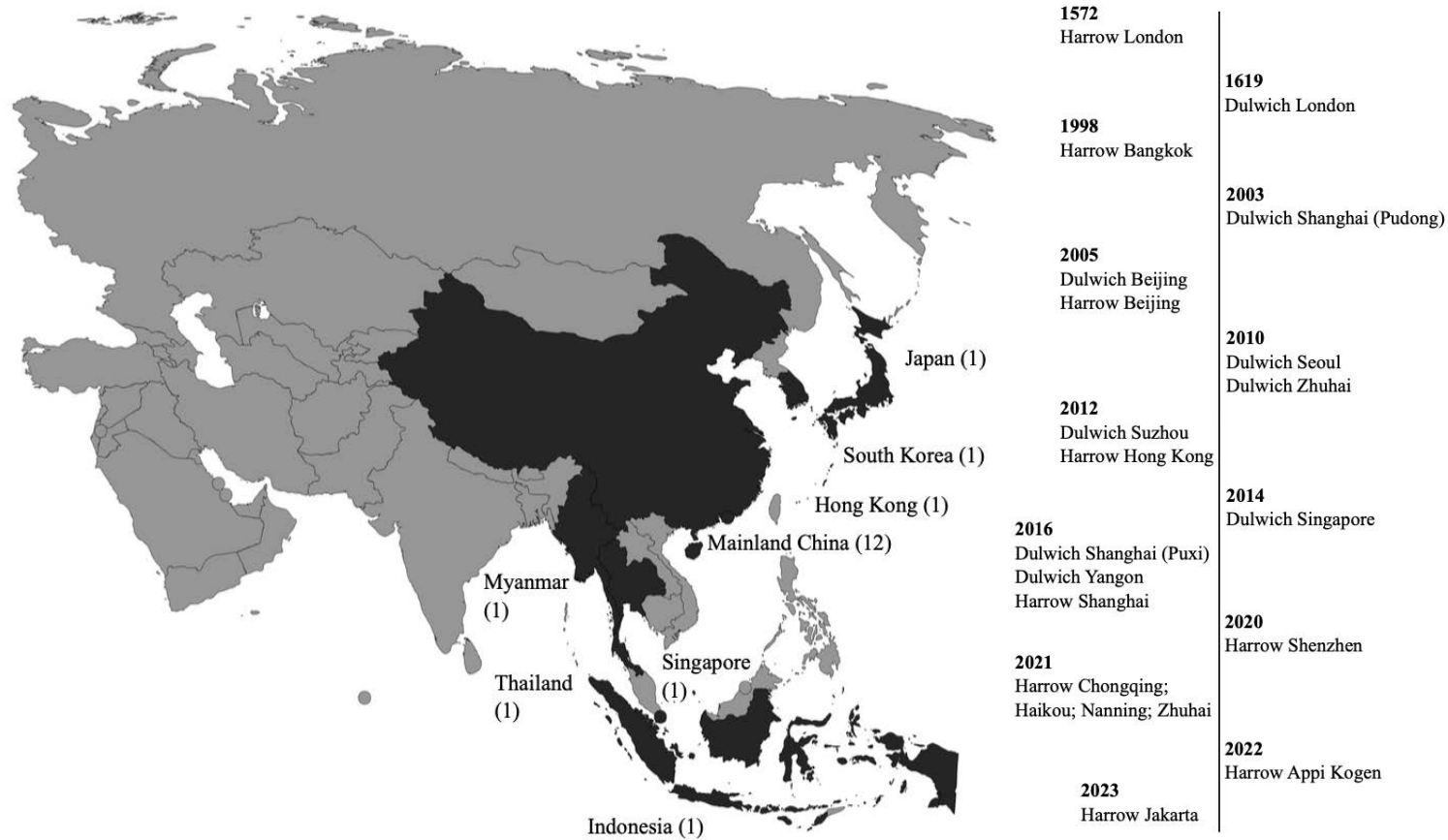
The Dulwich College International subsidiary currently manages nine schools in China, Myanmar, Singapore, and South Korea, having withdrawn its name from the original Phuket franchise in 2005 after management differences with its franchisee (Curtis, 2005; Dulwich College International, 2021). Harrow operates 10 schools in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Thailand, with new schools set to open in the ski resort of Appi Kogen, Japan in 2022, and in Jakarta, Indonesia in 2023 (Harrow School, 2021a). Harrow’s strong presence in mainland China is in part the result of recent, rapid expansion, with the brand opening four new schools in 2021 alone, in Chongqing, Haikou, Nanning, and Zhuhai. Rather than the broader “Harrow International Schools,” these schools operate under the “Harrow Innovation Leadership Academies” moniker, promoting an emergent, hybrid educational model that is bilingual and meets the requirements of both China’s national curriculum and England’s secondary qualifications (Harrow Schools, 2021). This further expands the reach of the Harrow brand beyond wealthy foreigners and expatriates to better include a growing Chinese middle class who might “aspire to a form of education perceived to be superior to the local alternative” (Hayden & Thompson, 2008, p. 47). The prestige of both Dulwich and Harrow has enabled them to expand extensively and to recruit both local and foreign students in various locations. Figure 2 shows the territories in which they operate franchises and a timeline of schools’ opening years, demonstrating the extent, speed, and regional concentration of their expansion.

With their networks of schools continuing to grow, both Dulwich and Harrow have clear success marketing their franchises. Harrow’s original expansion into Bangkok was described “as near an exact replica of Harrow [London] as can be achieved under local conditions” (Bunnell, 2008a, p. 385). Architectural emulation seems to be one way schools continue to establish or translate their status. Dulwich College Singapore’s main building, for instance, appears almost identical to that of the founding Dulwich College in London, despite being built many hundreds of years later. Other franchise schools in mainland China adopt the style and even the uniform of their founding schools (Kong et al., 2020). In promotional materials, franchises place a strong emphasis on the history, status, academic reputation, and notable alumni of the founding school (such as former British Prime Ministers and members of the royal family). Images of traditional British architecture, British students in school uniform, and even the Union Jack are common (Wu & Koh, 2022).

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<sup>1</sup> The term “public school” in the UK refers to private, fee-paying schools and is generally used to describe the older, more prestigious of such institutions. By contrast, publicly funded schools are referred to as “state schools”.

**Figure 2.**  
*Countries/territories with franchise school locations of Dulwich College and Harrow School, with number of schools in brackets, and timeline of schools' founding dates.*



Source: Data from Dulwich College International (2021), Harrow School (2021), AISL Harrow Schools (2021)

Indeed, schools' growing drive to market or present themselves in a particular way has not been limited to franchised expansion. Recent decades have seen the strengthening of market forces even within domestic, public education systems, where state marketisation comes into sharper relief against the notion of education as a public good (Adnett & Davies, 2002; Gorard & Fitz, 1998; Holmwood, 2012; Noden, 2000). The significance of school marketing materials in both public (Hesketh & Knight, 1998) and private systems (Gottschal et al., 2010; Wardman et al., 2010) has grown, with schools now investing more time and money in the "glossification" (Gewirtz et al., 1995, p. 127) of their image and some even employing marketing professionals to assist in this process (Symes, 1998).

Researchers have noted a convergence of the images commonly presented by schools: most include the school ethos, key statistics, and images of school life (Hesketh & Knight, 1998). In their promotional materials, elite schools strike difficult balances, such as between a focus on tradition and innovation (Symes, 1998), whilst international elite schools balance framing the student as a local community member and a global citizen (Tamatea et al., 2008). Overseas franchises appear keen to reference their founding schools, but English founding schools almost hide their international activity, writing of it only in hard-to-find corners of their websites. Instead, they discuss community involvement exclusively in terms of the local (Brooks & Waters, 2015).

### **International schools as enclosures of privilege: an analytical framework**

I explore the similarities and differences in the marketing of two elite English schools, Dulwich and Harrow, across various locations in England and Asia. As an analytical lens, I employ Ingersoll's (2018) theory of international schools as elite educational enclosures which "protect and foster the mobility of elites who have the resources to gain access, or membership to the club" (p. 271), suggesting schools craft specific and deliberate boundaries between themselves and the societies in which they exist. The conceptualisation of the school as an 'enclosure' highlights the relationship between Dulwich and Harrow and both their home and host countries, and particularly how schools "symbolically position" (Ingersoll, 2018, p. 271) themselves within local and/or global communities across various locations. The analysis facilitated by this lens allows for an exploration of the way in which dominant forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2018)—the ways of being and cultural knowledge so often crystallised and legitimised by educational credentials (Lowe, 2000)—travel and are translated transnationally. Local communities might include physical, local geographies and emphases on local culture, whilst global communities might represent connections within the brand's transnational network of schools, or a perhaps less tangible, more imagined global network of cosmopolitan, geographically mobile elites (Kenway, 2016). Access is often connected to elite education (Maxwell et al., 2017) and may be promoted in schools' own marketing materials. Prospective parents may look for a particular framing by way of distinguishing themselves from local alternatives (Hayden & Thompson, 2008) or with the goal of a pathway to international higher education (Wu & Koh, 2022).

Within the limits of the enclosure, a privileged few have access to educational advantages unavailable to others. Ingersoll et al. (2019) use this lens to highlight the tension between the competitive, exclusive commodification of international education and the "international-mindedness as an aspirational disposition" (p. 31) being

marketed within it. Similarly, Bunnell et al. (2020) describe a tension between the exclusivity and prestige of elite schools and their capitalist, transnational expansion widening access to them.

This paper examines how schools balance these tensions in their promotional materials and how they use the concept of the elite enclosure to maintain an image of privilege despite their expansion widening access to the brand name. Wu and Koh (2021) describe the way in which British franchises “market the offshore...schools as no different from their parent schools in England, burnishing [them] with all things British with symbols and paraphernalia that suggest ‘distinction’” (p. 15).

### **The study and methodology**

This study employed a qualitative case study design. Harrow and Dulwich were selected as the focus of this case study as two of England’s oldest and most prestigious schools, and the two most extensive exporters of English schooling. Qualitative, textual analysis was used to understand how schools publicly frame, sell, and market themselves online. With this aim, schools’ own websites are particularly telling; they “provide the advantage of being in the language and words of the [schools], who [have] usually given thoughtful attention to them” (Creswell, 2015, p. 222). A significant body of literature has explored the increasing pressure under which schools create and present curated images of themselves (Hesketh & Knight, 1998; Knight, 1992; Symes, 1998). Further, content analysis has been described as “particularly applicable to qualitative case studies... producing rich descriptions of a single phenomenon, event, *organisation*, or program” (Bowen, 2009, p. 29, emphasis added). Analysing webpages produced by each school reveals how they aim to present themselves to prospective parents and students.

Eleven of the 23 schools managed by the two brands at the time of writing were selected for analysis as examples of both brand’s different models in various locations; this included a total of seven Harrow schools and six Dulwich schools (see Appendix 1), accessed and saved across three months between February and April of 2022. It was not possible to analyse all 23 schools due to capacity constraints. Schools were selected with the aim of creating a balanced sample, including franchises of various ages, as well as those both in ‘emerging’ economies, such as China and Thailand, and those in ‘developed’ economies, such as Japan and Singapore. The websites of schools are understood to have assumed much of the marketing and image-producing role previously held by the school prospectus (Gewirtz et al., 1995; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012). Particularly as schools are both established in multiple places and advertised transnationally, the school website becomes a much more relevant resource than the spatially bound prospectus.

Collated text from each school site was printed and coded by hand, allowing the researcher to “be close to the data and have a hands on feel for it” (Creswell, 2015, p. 239). Codes— and analytic memos written after each pass of a website (Peshkin, 2000)—were then collected and compared in a single spreadsheet. The process was reflexive and the codebook was amended through subsequent passes of the data (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011).



The analysis combined a deductive and inductive approach; existing literature had an influence on the study's initial codes, whilst the data were still allowed to speak for themselves, keeping the study open to unexpected or surprising results (Miles et al., 2020). Initial codes were based on the study's theoretical lens, research questions, and existing literature exploring (franchised) international schools. Examples include reference to the founding school, the framing of both students and the school as either globally or locally embedded, and a focus on the school's offering of international qualifications and a pathway to international (anglophone) higher education. Emergent codes were then identified during a "preliminary exploratory analysis" of each school (Creswell, 2015, p. 242), with the study's codebook amended through subsequent passes of the websites (Miles et al., 2020). Codes were also revised after inter-rater reliability testing, in which a workshop of peers coded samples of data and offered feedback. Some emergent codes include the use of aggrandising language, emphasis on a holistic education, and the promotion of a hybrid model fusing local and international curricula and cultures.

### **Findings**

Founding and franchise schools in various locations show both similarities and differences in their use of language and promotional emphases aimed at appealing to parents. These are seen, variously, across four key areas: the use of aggrandising language (or 'world-class' rhetoric); reference to the founding school's history, traditions, and notable alumni; emphasis on the prestige of qualifications offered and a pathway to elite higher education; and the framing of both students and schools as locally or globally embedded, or both. Differences reflect the franchise schools' various ages and establishment, the location in which each franchise operates, and the varying engagement of different franchise schools with local and international curricula.

### **The use of aggrandising language: hyperbole and exceptionalism through language**

Coded as aggrandisements, the language of exceptionalism is seen throughout the websites of all schools studied. However, it is used slightly more frequently in franchise schools than it is in founding schools, perhaps as the latter are better-established within a centuries-old market for private schooling. Across the six Harrow franchise schools studied, an average of nine instances of aggrandising language were recorded per school, compared to the London founding school's seven. Dulwich franchises averaged eight uses of such language per school, also compared to the founding school's seven uses. This sort of language is used to describe almost everything, from the brands themselves, to individual school facilities and locations, and the achievement and higher education destinations of students. Qualifiers such as "the best" and "the most" are common, and their impact is further reinforced by aspects of the schools being frequently described as "state-of-the-art" (*Harrow Zhuhai*), "world-class" (*Dulwich Seoul*), "one of a kind" (*Harrow Appi*), "a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity" (*Dulwich Shanghai Pudong*), and "among the best the world has to offer" (*Harrow London*). In some yet stronger examples, one school's "commitment rests in world-class staff, world-class facilities, a complete and consistent adherence to the highest possible standards" (*Harrow Bangkok*), a student theatre is described as "a crucible for producing fearless original work of the highest dramatic order" (*Dulwich London*), and Harrow's oldest franchise school is "truly a magical place where your children will start on an educational journey that is hard to match" (*Harrow Bangkok*).

The use of this form of linguistic exceptionalism is common and is engaged in by founding and franchise schools alike. However, topics it is used for vary slightly. Younger newer Chinese franchises are more likely to use more and stronger aggrandisements to reinforce the prestige of the international qualifications and prospective higher education offered. For example, three Harrow schools in Haikou and Zhuhai suggest the English pre-university 'Advanced-level' courses offered to students aged 16 to 18 are "regarded as the gold standard in the British education system and recognised worldwide" (*Harrow Haikou, Zhuhai*). The same three schools describe the universities their students attend as "the most sought-after universities on the planet." Notably, older Harrow franchises in Bangkok and Beijing—as well as the new school in Appi, Japan due to open in 2022—offer the same qualifications but only mention them by name.

A linguistic device favoured by founding schools—and used up to four times more than newer franchise schools—is that of "archaic slang" (*Harrow London*), used to emphasise the exclusivity of being a part of the school community and understanding its ways. Franchise schools use this extremely rarely (and most not at all), almost always explaining it in parentheses immediately following its use. By contrast, Harrow London describes the way in which "employing inspiring Beaks is crucial," and only in a much later page of the website explains this term to the reader: "Around 20% of our beaks (teachers) have doctorates and many undertake their own writing and research" (*Harrow London*).

### **Reference to the founding school's heritage, traditions, and famous alumni**

The long histories of the founding schools in London are clearly strong selling points for both the founding and franchise schools, although they are mentioned more frequently and described using more aggrandising language by the latter. Younger franchises particularly rely on the founding school history; older franchises have more of their own history to share. All schools are careful to refer to the connections between their initial establishment and the royal family of the UK. Dulwich London tells the story of its founding: "Dulwich College was founded by Edward Alleyn on June 21<sup>st</sup>, 1619, with letters patent from King James I. This magnificent document with the Great Seal of England still survives." Harrow London, "founded in 1572 under a Royal Charter granted by Queen Elizabeth I," uses a similar approach.

Franchise schools, whilst also emphasising these royal links, go further to connect the age of the founding school to tradition and school culture. Dulwich Beijing describes this connection:

As a member school of the Dulwich College International family, we draw upon over 400 years of tradition and experience from our founding College in London...Our traditions and values form our culture and are firmly embedded in all that we do. They also build the sense of community and connect the school to past, present and future.

Many of the franchise schools studied centre the Englishness of such traditions: Harrow Bangkok is described as "a typical British day and boarding school education...providing a British style independent boarding school experience," later

affirming that “In a sense being a boarder is the most authentic way to experience a Harrow education; after all, Harrow London has been offering a boarding-only education for over 450 years” (*Harrow Bangkok*). Many focus on the prestige of those who have studied at the school: “Dulwich has a long-standing reputation for producing fine actors, musicians, sportsmen and writers; many of our students now go on to engage in entrepreneurial, technological, cybernetic and innovative enterprises too” (*Dulwich London*), whilst others specifically name some of those figures: “Amongst the school’s alumni are some of the most influential figures in world history, including Lord Byron, Winston Churchill, Jawaharlal Nehru, King Hussein, Lord Rayleigh and numerous influencers, inventors, artists and Nobel Laureates” (*Harrow Appi*).

Although there is a significant focus on the heritage of the founding school and the influence of this on the franchises, all the schools studied attempted to strike a balance between history and innovation. This is best exemplified by two slogans used as headings across the websites of all sampled schools: Harrow schools use “Our past, your children’s future,” whilst Dulwich schools use “The future, founded in 1619.” Harrow London further describes this tension: “While Harrow is, ostensibly, a traditional place, at its heart is a hunger for innovation. As our pupils’ needs develop, so too does the organisation that surrounds them” (*Harrow London*). All the Dulwich franchises studied maintain that “The College has long been a pioneer in education,” again balancing the prestige of heritage and the appeal of innovative practice.

### **Qualification prestige and the higher education pathway**

A focus unique to the franchise schools studied is on the prestige of the English or international qualifications offered by the school and of the primarily anglophone universities attended by students after leaving. Again, aggrandising language is used to further convince parents of the advantage conferred by these privileges. More of such linguistic work is generally done by younger franchises, perhaps in places where the brand is less established, and the target market may be less familiar with the qualifications on offer. Harrow Bangkok, the oldest franchise school studied, only mentions that International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) and Advanced (‘A’) level courses are followed and that students achieve highly in them. By contrast, these same qualifications are described by one Harrow Haikou school as “highly regarded,” “an excellent and academically meticulous preparation,” and “the pinnacle of British school-level education” (*Harrow Haikou*).

Elite higher education is a significant focus of all the schools studied, with founding schools focused on UK institutions and only a brief nod towards elite US or other international universities. All the schools studied list specific institutions their students have attended. For franchise schools, “elite” higher education is coded largely as anglophone, with lists detailing almost 20 universities attended in the UK and US and under 10 universities in the Asia Pacific region. Almost all the schools in the sample take care to mention their offering of “bespoke” (*Harrow Zhuhai*) university counselling, which starts as early as age 16 to offer students support in writing personal statements, preparing for entrance tests, and practising for interviews.

### **Blending the local and global**

Franchise schools are more likely to frame both themselves and their students as globally rather than locally embedded, further connecting students to international curricula and an international higher education pathway. However, some franchises make an effort to blend a framing of students as both local and global citizens.

Both brands have now opened numerous new schools in mainland China (“Harrow Innovation Leadership Academies” and “Dulwich International High Schools”), allowing students to complete the Chinese national curriculum during early secondary schooling, followed by international or English qualifications. This is contrasted by the “International Schools” offered by both brands, some also in mainland China, that offer only English or international curricula. The newer, mainland Chinese schools make more of an effort to market their hybrid educational model, “where pupils are educated to become successful and distinguished members of Chinese society, with a truly global outlook” and the school “creates a blend of East and West, where pupils can be proud of their heritage, but in touch with the world” (*Harrow Zhuhai*). The model is framed in terms of instilling an understanding and respect for both Chinese and British cultures, and it is often implied that students will return to China following their encouraged progression to anglophone higher education. Both Harrow Haikou schools use the following metaphor:

At Harrow Haikou, we understand that good schools give their pupils roots and wings to be successful both academically and personally. Roots to know where home is and wings to fly away and use what they have learnt. At Harrow Haikou, our pupils’ roots will be in the Chinese and British cultures, history, traditions and language brought together in a way that is uniquely ‘Harrow’.

Harrow Zhuhai, similarly, is “passionately committed to developing students prepared to make a positive and purposeful contribution to society in China” (*Harrow Zhuhai*).

Dulwich schools, meanwhile, show considerable continuity between the websites of their various franchise schools—including between their “International Schools” and the hybrid model “International High School” in Zhuhai—to portray the connectedness both of its network and of its students. The schools appear more embedded within their own network, with more reference to other franchises and to inter-school events attended and hosted by different schools, such as the Dulwich Olympiad sporting competition. Dulwich uses this network integration to frame students as geographically mobile global citizens, seemingly by way of assuaging parents’ concerns around the disruption of relocation. As is written on the website of each Dulwich franchise:

Students from different Dulwich College International schools may get to know each other one year through a group event, and find themselves classmates the next when one of them has moved from, say, Dulwich College (Singapore) to Dulwich College Shanghai Pudong. Students facing the challenges of an international move will make a much smoother transition when their new school is so familiar.

Similarly, hybrid model schools often explicitly referred to themselves as such, making more of an effort to balance the history of the founding school and the Englishness of their qualifications with references to local culture. Harrow Haikou, for example,

describes the way in which its buildings are reminiscent of traditional Haikou balconies. Notably, this is almost the inverse of those schools that seek to emulate the architectural style of the English founding school (Kong et al., 2020), as was also exemplified in this study by Dulwich Singapore's main building and its striking resemblance to the centuries-old main building of Dulwich London—as well as early descriptions of Harrow's first expansion into Bangkok, said to be as similar to the London original as was possible (Bunnell, 2008a).

Although hybrid model schools in mainland China were more likely to refer to the importance of local culture alongside English and founding school traditions, there was considerable differentiation even among the more conventional “international schools” offering only English or international qualifications. Dulwich Singapore, Dulwich Seoul, and Harrow Appi all take care to mention aspects of local culture of significance to the school, where other “international schools” (including some in mainland China) do not. Dulwich Singapore mentions celebrating both Christmas and Lunar New Year, whilst Harrow Appi discusses the importance of respect for Japanese traditions. Dulwich Seoul was, notably, the “international school” with the most prevalent discussion of local culture, with the school referring to participation in *Chuseok* (the Korean harvest festival), a celebration of Hangeul Day, and the practice of Korean calligraphy. These local differences perhaps suggest Dulwich and Harrow believe local culture is of varying importance to consumers in different locations and adjust the balance of this framing against the prestige and history of the founding schools accordingly.

## **Discussion**

The focus of franchise schools on the prestige of the founding school and its history, as well as on the benefits of studying English or international qualifications and the selling of an anglophone higher education pathway, echoes the findings of previous studies on various forms of international schooling (Hayden & Thompson, 2008; Wu & Koh, 2022). The use of aggrandisements to varying degrees and on different topics demonstrates that founding and franchise schools are contextually situated. They adapt to convince prospective parents of the relative prestige of their educational offering and to frame an enclosure of privilege (Ingersoll, 2018) from which their students will benefit. However, whilst franchised expansion occurs primarily through the more traditional “international school” model, it is now increasingly occurring through a hybrid model catering to both local and foreign curricula, further complicating the way in which schools communicate an image of privilege.

### **Aggrandising language and the image of privilege**

The ‘world-class’ rhetoric that was seen throughout the websites studied, across both founding and franchise schools, suggests schools continue to place considerable importance on processes of image-building in their promotional materials (Hesketh & Knight, 1998; Symes, 1998). Indeed, this is perhaps yet more important when convincing wealthy parents in new locations of the merits of the brand's educational approach. Those schools advertising a boarding option transnationally must also convince some parents to send their children to school far away from their homes.

The linguistic exceptionalism used by all schools, and the “archaic slang” used by some, can be seen as examples of schools drawing boundaries between themselves and others, and managing consumers’ impression that the school is a place of relative privilege. Newer schools perhaps feel a greater need to “symbolically position” themselves as places of privilege (Ingersoll, 2018, p. 271) by way of establishing the prestigious image of the founding school in a new market. It is perhaps with this same aim that newer franchise schools refer more to the founding school and its long history (Wu & Koh, 2022).

Aggrandising language is a key tool through which both founding and franchise schools establish themselves as places of relative privilege. With widely varying founding dates, degrees of establishment, sociocultural contexts, and global embeddedness, it is understandable that schools engage with this linguistic exceptionalism to varying degrees. However, its prevalence across school types and locations suggests that the global rhetoric for understanding and selling such schools is, in some ways, rather similar. This is one area in which the global education industry perhaps aligns across transnational boundaries (Bunnell et al., 2020; Verger et al., 2017).

### **Qualification prestige and the anglophone higher education pathway**

Previous research suggesting the reputation of international qualifications and a pathway to anglophone higher education are considered key selling points by many international schools has been reinforced by this study. However, it is not just international qualifications, but English qualifications, too—such as IGCSEs and A-levels—that schools use particularly to sell the appeal of elite, English language schooling and higher education. In some franchise schools, especially those in China, the prestige of these qualifications was bolstered by explicit reference to English as the language of instruction. Franchise schools are perhaps keen to highlight the Englishness of both their qualifications and their instruction to differentiate themselves from local alternatives (Hayden & Thompson, 2008), and further draw a boundary between those inside and those outside of the school’s enclosure of privilege (Ingersoll, 2018).

That the founding schools do not engage in the same framing of either their qualifications or higher education pathway again reflects that the schools studied position themselves as places of privilege within specific contexts. Founding schools cannot differentiate themselves through these qualifications or a pathway to English universities as both are largely the norm in the UK. However, they are sure to advertise the elite institutional destinations of their former students, such as Oxford and Cambridge universities (Reeves et al., 2017). For overseas franchise schools (and indeed in world rankings), there is considerable overlap between elite and anglophone higher education, although there are instances in which one takes precedence over the other, or vice versa. Whilst big, globally recognisable names are common, franchise schools also share the attendance of their students at lower-tier anglophone institutions, the names of which do not tend to appear on the websites of the English founding schools. Both founding and franchise schools focus on a pathway to elite higher education and the qualifications required to get there, and the status of English language higher education sometimes precedes the importance of elite rankings for franchise schools. The status of anglophone higher education in general overseas is such that some franchise schools

will share attendance at lower-tier institutions that founding schools would not publicise in the same way. Franchises sell both qualifications and a higher education pathway as an anglophone educational offering distinct to that available elsewhere and to that available to those outside of the school's enclosure (Ingersoll, 2018), for parents who might view them as superior to the local alternative (Hayden & Thompson, 2008) or to other international schools with less brand cachet (Bunnell et al., 2020). The prioritising of anglophone higher education above options with a better academic reputation suggests the impression of English language higher education remains a positive one.

### **Blending the local with the global by way of widening appeal**

The development of the hybrid model further highlights the expansion of international schooling to include both local middle class and expatriate children (Gardner-McTaggart, 2018). This model echoes the Sino-Canadian schools studied by Wu and Koh (2021) in their provision to students of a "dual-track" and a "backup plan" (pp. 12-13) should they eventually decide against studying abroad—which may be an increasing challenge to franchise schools given Covid-related safety concerns and the deteriorating relationship between the US and China (Wu & Koh, 2021). Indeed, students at Harrow's hybrid model school in Haikou, but *not* those at the international school on the same site, have the option of taking the *Zhongkao* local secondary exam in addition to the English IGCSE exams. The model also has important implications for the framing of the schools and their students. Whilst previous research has suggested international schools look to distance themselves and their students from the local (Berting, 2010; Garton, 2003), or to balance framing their students as either global or local citizens (Tamatea et al., 2008), the hybrid model further complicates this distinction. Again, it might seem the enclosure of privilege (Ingersoll, 2018) is being constructed in a new way by hybrid model schools, where schools advertise privilege not only as distinct from the home society, but also within it.

Beyond the implications of the new hybrid model school, variations in conventional "international schools" remain interesting. The focus in particular of Dulwich Seoul on Korean culture is reminiscent of the way in which globalisation has developed in South Korea not to the demise of nationalism, but to its continued importance; South Korea perhaps presents a culturally unique context for the operation of a franchise school, in which the school is more required to be cognisant of "the curious mixture of two seemingly contradictory forces, nationalism and globalization" (Shin, 2003, p. 6).

Brands can be seen engaging with local and foreign/global cultures to varying degrees in different places. It is perhaps the case that enclosures of privilege (Ingersoll, 2018) are conceptualised differently in different cultures; some might place greater importance on an international outlook, whilst others might have a stronger drive to preserve local culture. Franchise schools engage in a complex balancing act in determining the framing of themselves, their students, and the educational offering they provide. The comparison between founding schools and their various franchises provides insight into the complexities behind the maintenance of privilege across transnational boundaries. Although they began as individual institutions within the UK, as these educational brands continue to grow, their idiosyncrasies will further suggest local differences in consumers' perceptions of what it means to have an "elite" education.

## Conclusion

Franchised exports of primarily English schools make up a growing portion of the international schools market, with almost 100 of such schools opening globally in the past quarter of a century. Harrow School and Dulwich College were the first schools to expand and today have the most extensive networks, concentrated thus far in Southeast Asia and East Asia. This study seeks a novel comparison of the centuries-old founding schools and their much younger franchise counterparts, adding to an emergent body of literature analysing the ways in which heritage, status, and longstanding reputations are translated across various contexts (Brooks & Waters, 2015; Bunnell et al., 2020).

The conceptual framework of international schools as enclosures of privilege (Ingersoll, 2018) demonstrates how expanding school brands adapt the framing of themselves depending on the age and establishment of a franchise. Younger franchises are more likely to use ‘world-class’ rhetoric and to refer more often to the prestige and history of the founding school, demonstrating a need to establish themselves as places of privilege in new settings. Both founding and franchise schools advertise a pathway to elite higher education, although the latter implicitly code this as almost exclusively anglophone and often give little attention to local alternatives. The sociocultural context of a franchise school is also of important influence. Some contexts, such as Japan, Singapore, and South Korea, require the school to devote more time and energy to local culture, whilst schools portray a more international or global version of themselves and their students in other contexts, such as Thailand. The emergent hybrid model of international schooling, catering to the requirements of both local and international curricula, is being used by some—but not all—franchise schools in mainland China. This model of school again places a greater importance on local culture, whilst also framing itself and its students as both locally and globally embedded.

This study presents a starting point for the focused exploration of expansionist schools and their franchises. Whilst Harrow and Dulwich have the most extensive networks of schools, other concentrations of franchise schools warrant attention, particularly in the Middle East. Further, the data used in this paper provide only one perspective. The study of school promotional materials tells us only how schools intend to portray themselves to parents and students; it does not explore how this image is interpreted by consumers. Future research might both include other brands of schools in other places and triangulate data sources (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to understand not just how schools present themselves, but how they are perceived.

Further study will also depend on host country approaches and shifting focal points in expansion. The past decade has seen the rapid growth of franchise schools in mainland China, largely due to economic growth and rising demand. However, recent reports suggest a shift in authorities’ attitudes. In 2019, the Chinese education bureau announced that any oversubscribed school would be required to run a lottery for places (Turner, 2019), but this was not enforced. More recently, in April 2022, the bureau announced that education providers would no longer be allowed to carry the name of a foreign institution (Langley et al., 2022). A letter sent to parents at Harrow Beijing said the school would refer to itself in future communication by the name “Lide,” although it



remains to be seen how the policy might affect the brand's international and online marketing of its Chinese schools, which continue to be branded as Harrow schools.

A volatile policy landscape is now shifting the focus of expansionist school brands. Westminster, another Clarendon Commission school, recently abandoned plans to open six Chinese franchises (Jack, 2021), whilst Harrow recently announced four new schools in India and one in the US (Harrow School, 2021b). With such varied economic and sociocultural contexts and changing policy landscapes, it will be interesting to see not just how Harrow positions itself within these new locations, but how it—and other franchise schools in mainland China—will continue operation. As expansionist schools enter an increasingly diverse array of contexts, the continued maintenance and communication of their privilege will present fruitful grounds for future study.

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**Appendix**

**Table A1.** Websites for analysis.

Brand	School Location	Website (Homepage)
Harrow	London, UK	<a href="https://harrowschool.org.uk">https://harrowschool.org.uk</a>
	Appi Kogen, Japan	<a href="https://harrowappi.jp">https://harrowappi.jp</a>
	Bangkok, Thailand	<a href="https://harrowschool.ac.th">https://harrowschool.ac.th</a>
	Beijing, China	<a href="https://harrowbeijing.cn">https://harrowbeijing.cn</a>
	Haikou (“Harrow International School”), China	<a href="https://harrowhaikou.cn/his/">https://harrowhaikou.cn/his/</a>
	Haikou (“Harrow Innovation Leadership Academy”), China	<a href="https://harrowhaikou.cn/hila/">https://harrowhaikou.cn/hila/</a>
	Zhuhai, China	<a href="https://harrowzhuhai.cn">https://harrowzhuhai.cn</a>
Dulwich	London, UK	<a href="https://dulwich.org.uk/">https://dulwich.org.uk/</a>
	Beijing, China	<a href="https://beijing.dulwich.org">https://beijing.dulwich.org</a>
	Seoul, South Korea	<a href="https://seoul.dulwich.org">https://seoul.dulwich.org</a>
	Shanghai Pudong, China	<a href="https://shanghai-pudong.dulwich.org">https://shanghai-pudong.dulwich.org</a>
	Singapore	<a href="https://singapore.dulwich.org">https://singapore.dulwich.org</a>
	Zhuhai, China	<a href="https://zhuhai-high-school.dulwich.org/">https://zhuhai-high-school.dulwich.org/</a>