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Parents fear their children could be 2008 guinea pigs

International schools benefit from increased interest as local ones gear up to implement major curriculum reforms

KATHERINE FORESTIER



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Parents afraid their children will be used as guinea pigs while local schools undergo major reforms are expected to opt out by turning to international ones.

Yew Chung International School is among those receiving increasing enquiries from worried local parents, according to Dr Gary Morrison, assistant director of the Yew Chung Education Foundation.

Many international schools pick up students who fail to win places to stay in their schools for A-levels but under the reforms to be introduced from 2008 all students will be able to complete six years of secondary education.

Mr Morrison said any loss of students for this reason would be more than compensated by those wanting established qualifications. "We are noticing increasing enquiries because of the uncertainties ahead," he said.

Dr Stephen Codrington, principal of Li Po Chun United World College, also expects interest in international schools to increase. When education systems in the UK and Australia underwent major reforms, there was a spurt in demand for the IB, he said.

But the new structure posed some challenges for international schools, he said - in particular those like Li Po Chun that draw students extensively from the local system. Around half of the college's students are recruited from local schools after Form Five.

"We are a two-year school. In theory 50 per cent of our students will become of university-level age," he said, referring to the proposed abolition of Form Seven in the public sector in favour of a fourth year of university. "We are looking at options. The most likely is the possibility of accepting students one year younger.

"I don't think that is a significant problem as it would bring Hong Kong in line with other countries as to when they start the IB. But the big question is whether the new curriculum will prepare students adequately for the IB 12 months earlier - it is too early to tell."

The new structure was also "messier" for international schools offering two-year post-16 courses. "Students will have started the first of a three-year course in another school. It is not as clean a break."

But he is confident that the attractions of the IB will continue to draw students, in particular if local universities follow those in many parts of the world in offering advanced credits for IB courses when they move to four year programmes. Otherwise they risked losing good students to overseas institutions, he said.

Arnett Edwards, the English Schools Foundation's post-16 consultant, said:

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"We would like to work with other international schools offering the IB to see how we can access universities. There are excellent models around the world for credit systems related to the diploma."

penalty'
● Agenda in hands of the children

Professor John Spinks, pro-vice chancellor of the University of Hong Kong, said: "It is highly likely that we will allow advanced standing for students having taken the full IB, as we believe that this programme prepares students well."


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Judith Guy, regional director of the International Baccalaureate Organisation in Singapore, said the IBO would track changes in the local system and would negotiate with universities on new entry requirements.


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Parent Alexandra Sun has opted for the IB by enrolling her son in Phoenix International School in Kowloon. "Among my friends no one wants to put their kids through the local system," she said. "This is a Chinese community but we put our children in international schools because they already have good systems."

Cheung Kwok-wah, chairman of the Home-School Co-operation Committee, said: "There are bound to be parents who feel they don't want their children to be the guinea pigs." But not many would be able to afford to opt out, he said.



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