

Smart Transitions: What Does It Take to Lead an International School?



By Tyson Wood, Director of Smart Leaders

For many Australian Principals, the thought of moving internationally to lead a school is an attractive opportunity. Featuring a rich tapestry of cultures and a blend of local and far reaching curricula, an international experience can offer a Principal or school leader the chance to build their global education perspective and broaden their overall leadership capacity. Remuneration packages are also known to be competitive, most notably within the over 900 Australian, British, American and international schools found throughout the world. When coupled with added incentives and local cost of living, these packages can certainly fund the lifestyle and travel advantages that come with living and working abroad.

Thanks to Australia's positive reputation in education and the rapid growth of the international school sector, many Principal jobs will be made available for Australian leaders. In this article, Smart Leaders interviewed five experienced Principals who transitioned successfully to International schools. Their sage advice will help you identify if an overseas opportunity is right for you and if it is, how to transition smoothly and acclimatize as quickly as possible.

Many People, Multiple Places

Taking up the helm of an international school will mean working with a range of people from different places throughout the world. This is especially the case for the Australian, British, American and international schools where expatriate children represent a large proportion of enrolment. According to John Mason, who transitioned from Ocean Forest Lutheran College, Western Australia to the Australian School Abu Dhabi, "unlike the more generally homogenous nature of staff in an Australian school, international school staff are from various nations and backgrounds and have a range of different training, proficiencies and workplace expectations. Similarly, the community enrolled in the campus is not as homogenous a background as in Australia and students have a wide range of further pathways. Many if not most students will be graduating to a tertiary education and/or working environment far flung from the campus and nation in which they graduate secondary school."

This dynamic adds greater complexity to operational and educational leadership. Student induction, timetabling, assessment, transitions and overall teaching and learning must accommodate students entering international schools at different times of the year due to the difference in school calendars from one country to the next. Staff leadership is also more complex in international schools. For Tim Waley, former Principal of Fahan School, Hobart, his experience abroad required an enhanced "empathy and awareness for teachers and the challenges they face in dealing with the plethora of pressures they are under to deliver much, much more than the contents of curriculum." According to experienced international school Principal Paul Grisewood, in many cases "staff are away from home and at times [being the Principal is like] being a surrogate uncle or aunt, assisting staff, husbands and wives to settle into new countries with families."

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Principals will need to adapt to how they manage, motivate and develop staff. In some schools' teachers and support staff range from expats of different countries to local staff. This creates income disparities, varying leadership expectation and even work ethic differences that need to be carefully considered when leading people. A component of Mason's transition was adjusting his use of staff meetings; "in Australia, as a school leader, the conducting of a meeting was generally justified as a necessity for dealing with some business items – often distinct from any social or community need. Due to the multicultural nature of staff, I devised a format for staff meetings that attempted to simultaneously address any business and then find favour with staff towards developing an esprit de corp. In essence, this changed my perception of the successful planning and conducting of staff meetings – and the scope of my leadership changed accordingly."

To achieve success, arrive with a commitment to changing your leadership style and be equipped with high levels of emotional intelligence and cultural

intelligence. Experienced international school leader Paul Griswood says, “in today’s increasingly global and diverse contexts it is important to be aware and understanding. You must be intelligent, not just in the academic sense, but also emotionally and culturally. Cultural intelligence enhances interpersonal interactions in a wide range of social contexts and is critical overseas.”

Navigate the Organisational Differences

The international school sector is steeped in diversity so it is vital to do your research when applying for Principal positions. Be sure to research the role as the Principal’s job description can be different from one school to the next. For Griswood, “the biggest difference [between the Principal in most Australian schools and international schools] is you are a CEO more than a Principal. There is much to do with business, finance, marketing, income generation, HR, large scale and complex recruitment involving overseas relocations, profit and detailed governance, all of which many heads are not experienced in, nor equipped for.”

Likewise, it is also important to research the organisational make-up of the schools you are applying to. According to Griswood, “the structure of school ownership and governance may range from not-for-profit or cooperatively owned schools with an elected parent board to a for-profit corporate owned school network with salaried corporate supervisors. This is a difficult and different concept for some Principals.”

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Many Australian Principals identify with not-for-profit structures. Thanks to the growth in school governance, operational compliance and wider governance training, they are also in a good position to adjust to the differences internationally. Nonetheless, adapting to the operational impact of different international ownership structures can present a challenge. For Waley, former Principal of Fahan School Hobart, “there is more likely to be a level of ‘corporate’ input as far as the day-to-day management of the school is concerned. This in turn means that the levels of autonomy one may, most likely, have enjoyed as a Head of an Australian school, will be affected by imposed conditions for conducting business.”

Be prepared to spend more time building a relationship with your Board or ownership group. It will go a long way to overcome possible language barriers, develop your business skills and ensure your values and education philosophies are embedded into executive decision making to safeguard and effectively govern the school. Erik Hoekstra, former Director of Sekola Ciputra, Indonesia reflects, “as a leader of the high-profile unit within the corporation which built the school, I had to learn to do things the local way. This was especially important in the early years when I was the only expatriate invited to corporate celebrations. I threw myself into group activities. This extended to school bonding activities and typical Indonesian activities.” For Hoekstra, this led to greater autonomy over time. The knowledge and skills he learned



early on from the ownership group developed his business and financial leadership abilities enabling him to be a more agile leader that could effectively drive the best balance between business and education.

Adapt to Varying Expectations

School success is measured differently in international schools and through a range of government, business or curriculum authorities, the bureaucratic machinations take time and effort to navigate. This elevates the complexity and regularity of compliance and relevant leadership activities and can increase pressure if not carefully managed. For Waley, he recalls needing to adjust to the “more intensely detailed and more diverse” reporting requirements. “The pressures for the school to perform well at annual inspections conducted by the regulatory authority were and remain immense. The reason for this is that in one country where these inspections occurred on an annual basis, and no matter how effectively one had addressed the areas of concern from the previous year, there would always be a new set of expectations to clear. The school’s rating from the inspection was tied to annual fee increments. Naturally the view of the corporates about the effectiveness and evaluation of the Head was inevitably linked to this.”

The biggest adjustment for Principal John Mason, was setting aside more time to undertake tasks in response to a more ‘measured’ pace of the operations dictated by authorities. For Mason, “more time was needed because it was often normal practice to expect and accept that deadlines and dates were often moved and/or the mode of response between school and educational authority could change to require the task to be in need of a different type of submission.” Adapting to international schools often means adding more structure, organisation and patience to your leadership.

Success at Home Translates Internationally

The success you found in Australia can translate internationally as despite the differences there are many similarities. For Waley, regardless of the cultural or socio-economic differences found abroad, “kids are still kids the world over and not too much differs in their reactions to particular circumstances at particular ages.” As such your educational leadership knowledge, skills and abilities will be fully utilised abroad. Mason notes that you will be “required to know, support, live and enliven the schools mission. [You will be] the gatekeeper [for] hiring staff and enrolling families – and safeguarding the needs of both. [You will need] to be knowledgeable of the professional development needs of yourself and staff – and where required discern and deliver the provision of information to parents.” And like in Australia, you will need “to be cognisant of establishing positive relationships with the relevant authorities to maintain licence to operate.”

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Be Agile, Stay True to Your Values

For Stephen Cox, who has successfully transitioned into several international schools throughout the world, “leadership styles should be fitness for purpose, like a bag of golf clubs. Great leaders have the skills to be able to deliver the right leadership style of the matter in hand.” Be flexible, adaptable and learning agile. Your ability to learn how to be effective in new and different situations will define your success abroad. So too will integrity. As Grisewood told us, “[your operating systems will change but] your values and philosophies will remain.” They should be at the forefront of your research into a school and employment selection. Moreover, your values and educational purpose will guide you through the inevitable instances of greater complexity, unfamiliarity and ambiguity.

Big Change, Great Reward

Despite the many challenges, an experience internationally will bring many rewards. Among them is professional and personal development and enrichment. All the Principals we spoke to felt their international experience made them a better leader and person. Enhanced global education perspectives, wider leadership scope and broader cultural intelligence are a few of the dimensions to your leadership ability that will grow with an international experience. Waley says, “while there are challenges in all walks of the educational highways of the world, the opportunity to work in an international setting is one that I highly recommend. It provides an exceptionally rich experience across so many different emotions and platforms. It is one I recommend without hesitation.” Grisewood states, “ask any Head – as challenging as it was, they would do it all over again and highly recommend it.”

If you are considering a move overseas there are many places you can find support. The international school sector

is growing and along with it consulting and professional development services. Smart Leaders, can help connect you with jobs and other Principals who have successfully transitioned and acclimatized.



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