

COBIS - BSO Consultation Response Document

On 26 November 2015 the DfE announced the launch of its first revision of the standards and inspection arrangements for British Schools Overseas (BSOs). COBIS played a significant role in the establishment and launch of BSO standards and their inspection system and is once again well positioned to offer a leading response to this consultation.

The COBIS consultation was extensive. With a global network of 253 COBIS Accredited, Member and Candidate Member schools and 178 commercial Supporting Members in over 74 countries, responses were received from a diverse range of high quality British international schools which educate approximately 150,000 students worldwide.

COBIS has further consulted with the Federation of British International Schools in Asia (FOBISIA) with a school network of 53 schools.

Through the publication of the new draft DfE standards for BSOs, COBIS members clearly understood the intention of the DfE to bring BSO standards for inspection into line with the revised standards for independent schools in England which, came into force earlier in 2015. COBIS highlighted to its members that these changes incorporate most of the provisions in Part 4 of the Education and Skills Act 2008, which replace the regulatory provisions in the Education Act 2002.

To provide background and context, COBIS articulated to its members that - according to the DfE - the key things which the new standards for UK independent schools do are:

- **Range & quality:** raise the bar for UK education standards by raising the quality threshold - aiming to secure continued improvement and to ensure that students have experience in a range of subjects appropriate to their age and aptitude.
- **Safeguarding:** strengthen the standard on the welfare, health and safety of pupils to improve safeguarding - so that schools will not meet the requirements merely by drawing up policies but will also need to show that they have been implemented effectively.
- **SMSC:** tighten up the standards on spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils to strengthen the barriers to extremism; this includes encouraging respect for other people, particularly those with characteristics set out in the UK Equality Act 2010 (age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, LGBT, sex and sexual orientation.) It also includes promoting fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs.
- **Leadership:** introduce a new standard on the leadership and management of independent schools.
- **Complaints:** remove the requirement for schools to record all complaints, letting them use their judgment as to when informal complaints are recorded.

The Voice of the BSO Sector

This paper sets out to reflect the voice of COBIS School Members, commercial Supporting Members and many non-Members with which the association has relationships. Key themes which ran through responses to the wide COBIS consultation were as follows.

Raising the Bar

Improving standards and outcomes for students, their families, staff and the wider school community is the key driver for individuals and groups who responded to this consultation. The revision to BSO standards and inspection arrangements was welcomed by many. Members clearly voiced the opinion that keeping children safe and developing spiritual, moral, social and cultural character is of paramount importance.

Many feel this is what sets British education apart from other international competitors.

Exporting the Equality Act 2010

By far, the most problematic area for schools in some jurisdictions is the new requirement to *"actively promote principles which ... encourage respect for other people, paying particular regards to the protected characteristics set out in the Equality Act 2010"*.

The main issue raised by members was that, whilst it is expected and hoped that ALL schools will encourage and develop respect for a wide range of life choices and situations, including those listed in the Equality Act; in certain countries it would be impossible to be as specific in teaching and learning activities as the regulations appear to demand.

Promoting respect for gay, lesbian and bisexual people, even though the practice of homosexuality is illegal in certain countries, particularly in the Middle East and parts of Asia and Central Africa would have a "dramatic effect" in that Headteachers in British international schools in certain jurisdictions overseas would face imprisonment.

Clearly, a measure of pragmatism is required in different cultural environments. For example, over the years, Arab nations have made numerous concessions to both their cultural and religious practices in order to accommodate and promote western business investment. If other nations can do it, then surely it is not beyond the UK government to do likewise. In 2013, David Willets said, "There are few sectors of the UK economy with the capacity to grow and generate export earnings as impressive as education." It therefore needs pointing out that setting prestigious British curriculum schools on a collision course with their host nations is not going to further the cause, influence, access to soft power and export potential of British education.

Many have recorded that a pedantic application of these standards with little appreciation of context could be disastrous. Many have concerns that much would depend on an intelligent, common-sense interpretation by any inspecting body or, more pertinently, any Lead Inspector.

The most disconcerting aspect of the draft is the very obvious insularity and the cultural insensitivity of the language, both of which are further implied in some of the 'requirements'. Detailed expectations on PSHE, and many other references are totally steeped in UK speak.

Members do fully support the values espoused as 'British Values' but are uncomfortable with the suggestion they are exclusively British. Many non-British schools and national education systems worldwide applying the same principles of SMSC which are practiced in the UK. In the same way, this is recognised by others to help students foster increased tolerance, respect and understanding of themselves and other people as well as creating a strong and balanced school curriculum.

A significant number of respondents highlighted that in many host countries where British overseas schools operate there is a legislative requirement for components of the host country curriculum, culture and language to be incorporated into school life and to be promoted. This situation when enshrined in a rule of law creates serious challenge when adhering to the sharing and teaching the principles of the Equalities Act 2010.

While schools understand the wish to benchmark quality, the overall impression for members is that this component of the revisions to the standards is insular and insensitive. In addition, many view them as failing to reflect experience of or to encompass British international schools.

The idea of British Schools Overseas having a quality "stamp", which was potentially good idea, has been lost, and this draft document is not fit for purpose with regards to truly international schools. There is a big difference between a British School overseas and reflecting what is our successful export: an international school overseas that follows the British tradition and curriculum. The proposed document has missed something along the way. Perhaps the problem is in the title itself - should it not be BISO - British International Schools Overseas?

Keep It Simple

Repeated reference to UK legislation seems obscure and out of place. There is a need to strip out, or simplify and explain these references (for example in a glossary). In particular, it was suggested that a separate explanation of all the legal and statutory references would be useful. Many felt that as they stand they are inaccessible and off-putting especially as they are so woven into the text.

British International Schools are not pockets of Britain planted on pieces of British territory, like an embassy, but are built and run on foreign soil. They are subject to the laws of the country they are in and not British law. Why then, when 80% of students are now not expatriates but locals, would schools be required to ensure their staff and students understand British law?

Members expressed the feeling that with the new proposed standards, compliance rather than quality has become more of a focus and that there has been a shift in priority and to take this overseas is not going to work well.

BSO Logo

Members find the BSO logo unimpressive and uninspiring. The design of the BSO logo is totally ineffective. The feeling is that it does not represent the DfE in any way, or the purpose of BSO - neither the 'British' nor 'Overseas' nor 'Education' element. In short it does nothing to convey a premium kite mark of global quality. Many schools sadly commented that they have chosen not to publish the logo on their website and marketing collateral due to its amateur design. A design to reflect a government crest would have added much needed gravitas and would have been welcomed by many. As British education is a reputable export of high economic and cultural value, to have no corporate publication guidelines connected to this logo is a shock to many as is the fact that expense has been incurred to protect such a weak design through the Paris convention. A new design would be welcomed by the market.

Student Welfare and Safety

It is clearly recognised that children and young people all over the world have the same rights and needs. Child Safety is very important as every child has the right to protection, welfare and safety. The same also applies to fire standards.

To work with, educate and support children is a privilege. Resoundingly, respondents commented that it is of paramount importance that those working with, or who have unsupervised access to children are rigorously vetted through criminal background checks. In addition, safer recruitment practices, induction, appraisal, training and relevant safeguarding and whistle blowing policies should be implemented on a daily basis. Each member of the school community; be they students, staff, parents, visitors and governors should not operate in culture of child protection and safeguarding complacency. This should be evaluated with rigour during the inspection process.

Recognition of Transnational Standards

Many feel that it is important to work to and to be inspected against the same standards which apply to UK independent schools. This enables BSOs to attain an international standard of high quality and repute which is recognised by and respected by students, parents and staff from a rich diversity of nationalities.

National, Regional and Local Contexts

There is nevertheless a fundamental and real need for the BSO standards and inspection system to take more account of the range of contexts in which schools operate. The DfE does not seem to appreciate the operational complexities of British Schools Overseas be they individual or part of a group. Pragmatically in most cases there only needs to be a preceding phrase acknowledging what is appropriate and legal in the local context and host country. Many commented that it would be positively welcomed if the system could go back to these taking precedence. For example, these could be anything from how buildings adapt to climate or fundamental British values. For example, a host country may not be a democratic society outside the school perimeter however a school can democratically elect

its head girl or boy and encourage respect between religious and ethnic groups.

Frequency of Inspection

Many commented that maintaining a three year BSO cycle is unnecessary and prohibitively expensive particularly for those schools based far from the UK, which incur the expense of long haul flights. While the cost of inspection and regulation every 3 years might be acceptable in the UK, there is a strong feeling that the cycle should move to every 4 or 5 years. The significant cost of a BSO inspection, every three years can be the equivalent to the cost of recruiting and employing a high quality new teacher. When probed further, respondents suggested the view that for schools that have already met the standards successfully a five-year cycle is all that is needed - perhaps with an interim small-scale 'compliance' visit. This is already effectively the case in England.

BSO Inspectorates – The Variables

Members have also questioned whether accredited BSO inspectorates are equally likely to be able to cope with the revised format. What implications will the new standards have on:

- Costs of the inspection?
- Size of inspection teams. Does this allow for the potential use of peer inspectors?
- Interpretation of standards?
- Duration of inspections?
- Quality of inspection reports?
- Quality, professional background and training of inspectors?

DfE Approval Process for BSO Inspectorates

Members are keen to know if the standards have further implications on:

- Revisions to the process of inspection?
- Conditions of remaining on the approved BSO inspectorate list?
- Complaints procedures?
- BSO Inspectorates evaluation?
- Inspectorate code of conduct being revised?
- Service Level agreements?
- Duration of DfE approval?

Ofsted Monitoring of BSO Inspectorates

Concern was expressed at the lack of consistency of inspecting and reporting among the current inspectorates (including the nature of teams, thoroughness, and use of evidence, judgements, and type of reporting.) Will there be changes to the way Ofsted monitors the quality of inspectorates? In light of the proposed changes:

- Is the process for monitoring BSO inspectorates effective?
- Does this present good value for money?
- How will the process work?
- How frequently are they monitored?

Healthy 20:20 Vision

From the perspective of many British international schools which educate children representing in excess of 60+ different nationalities per school, many expressed surprise that the DfE express what is seen as a narrow view of the world, where all members of a school should be seen to underpin British values. Many respondents to this consultation commented that one of the most exciting, rewarding and advantageous characteristics of an international education in the British tradition, is the opportunity it offers to celebrate diversity and to stand in the shoes of others.

Overall, members feel that by taking into account the regulatory and legal requirements of the host country and with less reference to specific UK legislation and “UK ideals” the standards could provide a workable set of criteria for good and outstanding international British curriculum schools to be judged against as a measure of real quality which is comparable with the education provided by independent schools in England.

To conclude, whilst the many of the proposed revisions are seen as positive, the three overriding concerns were that respondents:

1. want to ensure that revised standards are fit for purpose
2. that they reflect and encompass the real world in which British overseas schools operate
3. and that that they remain relevant and represent the best interests of the growing export of British education in the school and wider education sector

COBIS takes the strong view that, to ignore these concerns would be deeply regrettable. In fact, it would place the long term future of the BSO inspection system in serious jeopardy.

Further Support and Questions?

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