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**British elite private schools and their overseas branches:  
unexpected actors in the global education industry**

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**Abstract**

*Our paper examines the opening of branches overseas ('satellite colleges') by elite private schools mainly located in England ('founding colleges'), largely in emerging economies of the Middle East and southeast Asia. We trace the development of these 'satellite colleges' over three successive waves of growth, from opportunistic venturing in Thailand in the late-1990s to their recent rapid growth in numbers in a phase characterized by the market entry of new actors and geographic diversification. We argue that the emergence of these schools occurs in line with the continued intensification and diversification of the Global Education Industry. This implies a significant shift in the modes of legitimation on which British elite schools typically rely.*

## **The concept of the ‘Satellite College’**

Our paper is concerned with a largely unexpected and under-investigated educational phenomenon; the exportation and quasi-replication over two decades of the elite private school brand, pioneered in the late-1990s by London’s Dulwich College, and Harrow School, initially in Thailand through an opportunistic franchise business model although more lately within ex-British colonies as part of a ‘global education industry’ driven by the British Government encouraging exports and host-nations encouraging a diversity of private schooling provision for the emergent middle class.

This growing yet still overlooked trend is characterized by branches/offshoots of highly prestigious elite private boarding schools, long linked with the (re)production of national elites and originating still largely from England, although others from Australia (e.g. Haileybury Melbourne), Canada (e.g. Branksome Hall), United States (e.g. Chadwick), and Scotland are also marginally involved. Reports (Bedford, 2020) say there are at least 129 independent branded private schools overseas, involving 47 private school brands (Cloke, 2021).

Thus far, this activity has been quite regional, largely centred on the Greater ASEAN trade bloc region, and the Middle East. It can today be seen in South-East Asia (Cambodia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, South Korea, and Thailand), Central Asia (Kazakhstan), the Middle East (Dubai, Abu Dhabi), North Africa (Egypt), and East Africa (Kenya). Major developments have happened in Mainland China, as well as Hong Kong, plus there have been recent developments in Europe (Bulgaria, and Switzerland), and Japan (Simcox, 2021). Hence, we can identify very little activity across Africa, and Central Asia, plus no activity in Latin America.

Similar to the offshore university campuses, many are located on ‘transnational education hubs’ e.g. England’s Marlborough College opened a branch in 2012 on ‘EduCity’ in

Iskandar, Malaysia. North London Collegiate School has a branch in ‘Global Education City’ on Jeju Island, Korea.

These overseas branches defy exact title, but we will refer to them as the ‘Satellite Colleges’ (‘SCs’), a term borrowed from Bunnell (2008) which still stands as one of only two academic papers on this topic, alongside a more recent paper which updates that paper from 2008 and charts the subsequent growth and development of the model within a ‘three-wave’ model of activity (Bunnell, Courtois and Donnelly, 2020). That paper had reported upon how a distinct ‘global education industry’ has emerged aimed at serving an emerging ‘global middle class’, in areas such as Thailand and mainland China. Our paper is an extension of that 2020 paper, bringing the trends and developments up to date.

## **The dominance of the British schools**

The dominant body of British SCs has unexpectedly risen substantially in recent years, indeed doubled since 2015; the numbers reached 20 in 2012, 44 in 2015, 73 in 2018 (Santry, 2018), almost 80 in 2021 and 93 by the beginning of 2022. We can expect 100 by end of 2022 (see Table 1 below).

The 11 cities around the Pearl River Delta (e.g. Guangzhou, and Shenzhen) look set for the most future growth (Quinn, 2021). Most British SCs are from England although Scotland’s Fettes College opened a branch in Guangzhou in 2020. Indeed, 16 British ‘satellite colleges’ opened in China alone in 2020 (Quinn, 2020), representing the ‘Asia gold rush’ (Machin, 2017) of international schools in general where a new type of parent seemingly seeks to raise ‘cosmopolitan children’ (Soong, 2021).

Given the sudden, unexpected growth in recent years of this ‘model’ of elite ‘British-style’ schooling, especially in emerging economies such as mainland China where local middle-class parents might seek *le distinction* and status, we believe it now important to go beyond discussing the statistics and growth trends. Our knowledge of the SC seemingly currently stands at the same point as when Gaztambide-Fernandez (2009 p.1090) was stating of elite boarding schools in general that they ‘remain largely outside the gaze of educational researchers’ partly due to a lack of knowledge about what exactly defines them, and what makes them stand out from other schools in significant ways.

The need to focus more on building our knowledge about the relationship between the two SCs and their Founders is also driven by the fact that the continuous presence and role of England’s elite private schools is often negatively viewed and the sector in England is constantly under political scrutiny, both in terms of the social injustice of facilitating unfair entry to high-class society and the financial perks and benefits that the schools enjoy (Reeves etc, 2017). These linkages with potential social injustices arguably place the SCs under need of scrutiny as does the controversial revenue stream generated by the model, based on an emerging middle class in Asia and former British colonies subsidising the education of children back home in England whilst helping to maintain the fragile legitimacy of the schools in England (Bunnell, 2008).

### **The early ‘waves’ of growth**

It is worth discussing the growth of the British SCs in more detail. This rather unexpected development involving *some* of Britain’s most elite private schools (note: Eton College has not got involved with the Satellite model, preferring instead to use online technology to inter-act with overseas schools: Buller, 2019) is now well-established after appearing in the late-1990s

directly following the WTO's General Agreement of Trade and Services (GATS) at the culmination of the final ending of the 'Uruguay Round' in 1995, and which ultimately facilitated the trade and commercialization of education, as an export service.

Dulwich College's initial foray (in 1996) was closely followed by three others from England. Harrow School opened a branch in 1998, as did Bromsgrove School in 2002, and then Shrewsbury School in 2003, all initially in Thailand. Dulwich pulled out of the initial Thailand (Phuket) venture in 2005, meaning that Harrow International School Bangkok is the oldest established, with over 20 years of continuous existence.

This trend was seen as forming part of an opportunistic 'first wave' (Bunnell, 2008) of activity, spearheaded by prominent alumni members based in Thailand. The model had pragmatic historical roots, constructing branches abroad in a nation-state that had a well-established market that had close connections with the Founding College back in England (or London, to begin with). In other words, it was not intended to be a large-scale model, beyond Thailand, and it initially involved only people who had ties with the 'Father' colleges.

These ties are indeed strong. Historically elite English schools such as Harrow have helped cement the ruling classes, both in Britain and abroad, Thailand's Royal Family being a good case in point. The British so-called 'Public Schools', represented in extreme by the nine-member Clarendon Group (of which Harrow and Shrewsbury is a member), and the other less known British-based private schools which hold membership of the prestigious 'HMC' (Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference) recruit their students from around the world and have an increasing global appeal.

However, a much wider body of HMC schools subsequently got involved after the initial 'Thai four', such as Haileybury in 2008 with a Satellite in Almaty, Kazakhstan. This second 'wave' of activity, fed by the British Government's attempts in 2005 to place in

question the charity-status of major private schools (Bunnell, 2008), led to the branches overseas being used to feed back-home revenue that could be used by the Founding Colleges to bolster scholarships and bursaries. This controversial re-cycling of monies from the Global South to schools in England remains the major financial objective and provider of growth of the SCs and this adds a further dimension to the need to scrutinize the linkages since they are ethically and morally problematic. The ‘Public Schools’ exclusively operate their own entrance examination (the *Common Entrance Examination*). Moreover, they receive no government funding and operate independently from the State sector – an independence which is a great source of pride and offering a practical shield and form of defence (Prosser, 2020) against political attacks. It was said (Pickard, 2013), at a time when there were 29 offshoots, that:

If there is a theme governing the locations of these new schools it is money. The fees can be on a par with their UK counterparts; parents can spend the equivalent of the average British salary on one child’s annual education.

In discussing the reasoning, it was said that:

One reason is that the overseas branches act as a marketing tool for the mother school by raising its profile internationally – encouraging affluent parents in Asia or the Middle East to send their parents to the UK institution.

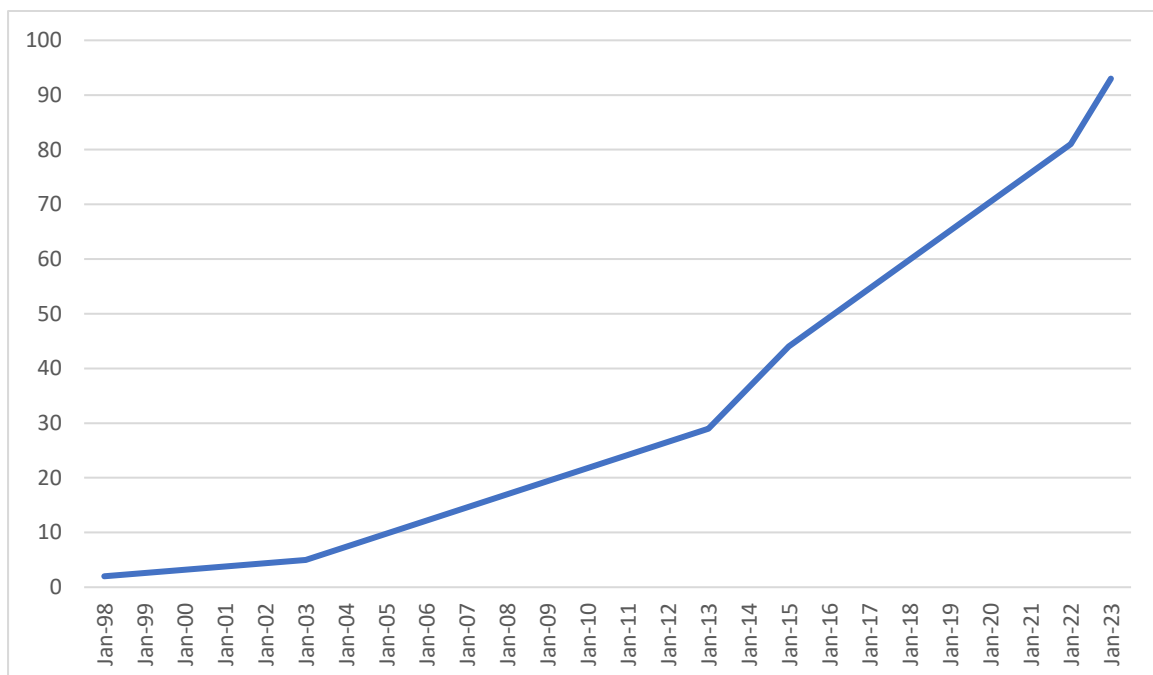
Another reason given was that:

Overseas profits are often used to pay for bursaries to give children from less advantaged backgrounds access to the UK schools.

Table 1 below shows how a distinct ‘third wave’ of growth since 2012 has been aided by the British Government’s aims to promote and support education as an ‘export earner’ (Bunnell, Courtois, and Donnelly, 2020). By 2015, Wellington College and Brighton College were also heavily involved, and 2018 saw the most SCs appear in any single year (Turner, 2018). A subsequent supply-chain made up of ‘middle-men’ (legal experts, and visa consultants etc.) has

emerged, within a definite ‘global education industry’, which has aided the development of SCs in challenging political and commercial contexts such as mainland China, and the Middle East (Bunnell, Courtois, and Donnelly, 2020). Ex-British Colonies such as India, Kenya, Myanmar (Burma), Malaysia and Singapore now have branches of Dulwich College, Marlborough College, Repton, or Wellington College. Rugby School now has an offshoot in Thailand, as does Wellington College, and Brighton College. In fact, Bangkok has maintained its role as the focal point of activity. Recent developments involve Japan, an area previously untouched by elite private English schooling (Simcox, 2021). Brighton College announced in 2022 plans to open seven branches across Vietnam, beginning in Hanoi in 2023 (Stacey, 2022).

**Table 1: The ‘waves’ of growth**



The globalising practice of elite schools in general has been observed during the time of this ‘third wave’, as they attempt to compete and outplay each other (Kenway and Fahey, 2014). The linkage and extent of affiliation between the two has undergone very little research inquiry but the initial franchise model (which is still the dominant model: Turner, 2018) appears to have been altered, over time, to suit different contexts. Initial reports focused upon the



replication of architecture, but this aspect seems to have been largely abandoned by ‘second’ and ‘third’ wave activity.

### **The context of the ‘third wave’**

The Independent Schools Council’s (ISC) annual census for 2022 (released in May 2022 but taken in January 2022) showed there are 93 British satellite colleges educating 59,739 pupils. This had expanded from 81 branches in 2021 educating 52,975 children. As of January 2022, a total of 47 are in mainland China (an increase of 10 since 2021), educating 27,412 children, and 14 are in the Middle East (9 in the United Arab Emirates). A further seven are in Thailand, five in Hong Kong, four in Singapore, 3 in Malaysia, 3 in Africa, and two in South Korea. Gordonstoun plans to open its first overseas branch, in China, in 2022 (Liang, 2022). A major area of activity is the southern Pearl River Delta area of Guangdong bordering Hong Kong (Quinn, 2021).

Table 1 above clearly identifies the three stages but also shows how, since 2021, an apparent ‘fourth wave’ of growth is starting to appear. That development will need theorising in due course.

The scene in 2022 is dominated by six big players. Table 2 below shows how they (in 2022) have 45% of all the British SCs (44 in total). Dulwich College is the biggest single operator. The Dulwich ‘Family of Schools’ combines seven ‘international schools’ (two in Shanghai, and one in Beijing, Suzhou, Singapore, Seoul, and Yangon) plus two ‘international high schools’ in China, a ‘managed’ school in Shenzhen, and a further three ‘sister schools’ in Dehong. All 13 come under the umbrella of ‘Dulwich College International’. Repton College has a growing body of seven branches under its ‘Repton Family of Schools’ umbrella: they are in Dubai (two branches); Abu Dhabi; Egypt; Malaysia; China (Xiamen); and Bulgaria. Harrow School has ‘Harrow Internationals’ in Bangkok, Beijing, Haikou, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and

Shenzhen. A branch is due to open in Jakarta in 2023. In 2022, Harrow opened the first British boarding school in Japan (in Appi). Wellington College International (WCI) operates six branches, in China and Thailand, educating 5,000 children. A branch is due to open in India (Pune) in 2023. Brighton College has five overseas branches. The ‘Brighton College International Schools’ are in Abu Dhabi, Al Ain, Bangkok, Dubai, and Singapore. Malvern College International involves branches in Cairo, Hong Kong, Switzerland, plus two in China and intends to open a branch in Tokyo in 2023.

**Table 2: A summary of the ‘Big 6’**

The ‘Dulwich Family of Schools’	<b>13:</b> two in Shanghai, and one in Beijing, Suzhou, Singapore, Seoul, and Yangon plus two ‘international high schools’ in China, a ‘managed’ school in Shenzhen, and a further three ‘sister schools’ in Dehong.
The ‘Repton Family of Schools’	<b>7:</b> Dubai (two branches); Abu Dhabi; Egypt; Malaysia; China (Xiamen); and Bulgaria.
The ‘Harrow Internationals’	<b>7:</b> Bangkok, Beijing, Haikou, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Japan (Appi), and Shenzhen.
‘Wellington College International’	<b>6:</b> China, and Thailand.
‘Brighton College International Schools’	<b>5:</b> Abu Dhabi, Al Ain, Bangkok, Dubai, and Singapore.
‘Malvern College International’	<b>5:</b> Cairo, Hong Kong, Switzerland, plus two in China and intends to open a branch in Tokyo in 2023

Other British private schools have a significant presence. Hurtwood House in Surrey has four branches in China, operating under the ‘He De’ brand. Wycombe Abbey also has four (three in China, and one in Hong Kong). North London Collegiate School has branches in Dubai, South Korea, and Singapore. Durham School opened its first branch in 2019, in Qatar, followed by branches in Nairobi, and Dubai. New schools continue to get involved, in new places. The King’s School Canterbury intends to open the first satellite college in Cambodia, in 2022, joining the one it opened in 2019 in Shenzhen, China (where there is also a branch of Scotland’s Merchiston Castle School, and Harrow).

### **The growing criticism**

St. Paul’s Girls’ School opened its first overseas branch in 2021, in Chengdu (where Malvern also have a branch) just as commentators were beginning to discuss (Hazell, 2021) how the number in China might have reached its peak. It was reported (Turner, 2019) in October 2019 that the Chinese government is ‘fed up’ with British overseas schools ‘creaming off’ the most talented students. Private schools had already been told they need to teach the Chinese national curriculum as well as whichever international qualifications they offer. Westminster School had planned to open six branches in China by 2028 but pulled the venture in September 2021 citing issues with Chinese Communist Party interferences (Wood, 2021).

An investigation by *The Times* raised the issue of how some ventures in China have been financed by close ties with the Chinese Communist Party (Ellery, 2021). It was further revealed that the British SCs have been using (or rather, exploiting) their charitable status to claim back, over 15 years, in ‘gift aid’ an estimated £13 million in tax on income worth £67 million received abroad (Dirnhuber, 2021).

It is noticeable that the more recent SCs have been positioned outside the nation's Capital city e.g. Repton School in Bangaluru, Rugby School in Chonburi. This points to the widening appeal of a broader body of parents who hitherto have been ignored or neglected or were simply not financially available. Sancho (2016 p.478) describes how a new class is buying into English-speaking 'International Schools' (of which the SC might be seen as an offshoot, a form of the emergent 'Type C1': Bunnell and Poole, 2020). Sancho discusses how in India's 'second tier cities', these franchised, branded, 'replicated' models of elite schooling offering 'a new arena for the wealthiest to reinstate their class privileges and distinguish themselves from the expanding middle classes.' This fundamental shift in clients moves the discussion towards a greater sociological path and opens up a greater critical discussion about the character, nature, and purpose of the SC schooling model. Inter-connected to this, comment has recently been made (Kong, Woods, and Zhu, 2020) about how the '(de)territorialised appeal' of the SCs are reflecting new areas of urban segregation in China.

### **A paradoxical model?**

This potentially controversial development is also arguably quite paradoxical. The appeal of well-established schools such as Dulwich, founded by Edward Alleyn in 1619, and their power rest on their historical association with the landed aristocracy and the corporate and political elites, namely with the small fraction of the dominant classes that constitute what C. Wright Mills in 1956 famously termed the 'power elite'. Exclusivity and selectivity are key to their dominant position in the educational landscape. For this reason, while historical elite schools in England have somehow diversified their recruitment over time, and many now have large (record-high) cohorts of overseas students especially from China (Adams, 2015), it is uncommon for such schools to increase their numbers beyond what is strictly necessary for

their financial viability, or to allow for significant changes in their core demographics – which remain aristocratic, male, white and British (Brooks and Waters, 2015). This issue makes us rather cynical about the extent to which the SCs will (ever) be (allowed to be) fully a replicated or copied version of the ‘original’ back in Britain, and the extent to which the model will attract a large number of schools in England apart from the dominant 6-10 players that we can identify in 2022.

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