Historical Vignette

The Alliance for International Education: retrospective and prospective

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Antecedents

Quite when international schools first came on the education scene is debatable, but it is certainly the case that since their early days such schools have developed groupings and associations as mutual support mechanisms. As numbers of international schools have grown over the years, so too has the number of organisations formed to provide support through associations of like-minded schools (such as the International Schools Association, ISA), the development of appropriate curricula (including the International Baccalaureate, Cambridge International Examinations, Fieldwork's International Primary Curriculum and International Middle Years Curriculum, the College Board's Advanced Placement International Diploma and so on), professional development, recruitment and accreditation (through, for instance, the European Council of International Schools, ECIS and Council of International Schools, CIS), and postgraduate qualifications (offered by institutions including the University of Bath UK and George Mason University USA).

For international schools operating as individual institutions – as in earlier days they largely did – being part of such organisations and associations provided not only mutual support but also a set of external indicators against which stakeholders and other parties could form judgements. While the growth in numbers and scope of such organisations undoubtedly provided positive support for the work of international schools, the overlap in purpose of the plethora of different organisations and associations began to suggest to some that the potential existed for the creation of a forum that would be inclusive in encompassing all with an interest in international education, whatever the nature of that interest.

Early stirrings

Arising out of a number of informal and *ad hoc* discussions between individuals who met regularly at international school conferences and worked together in other international school-related contexts, a two-day seminar was convened in June 2001 by Jeff Thompson and Mary Hayden of the Centre for the study of Education in an International Context (CEIC) at the University of Bath to discuss the possibility of more organised collaboration that would encompass not only organisations but also individuals with an interest in international education.

The seminar brought together a group of individuals known to share an interest in developing the idea of a forum for discussion, debate and the dissemination and exchange of ideas of relevance to those with an interest in international education (CEIC, 2001). Though not formally representing particular organisations, those participating were from a number of different backgrounds and interests: discussion at the seminar identified a number of pointers for moving forward in a collaborative manner. It also built on ideas raised in an article published in the millennium (April 2000) issue of the *International Schools Journal*, where Mary Hayden and Jeff Thompson raised the prospect of what they tentatively described as an 'alliance' of those with shared interests in international education. It drew also on proposals for forming a so-called 'international school system' previously promulgated by Joe Blaney (1991) and Phil Thomas (1995), as well as on ideas discussed in a February 1999 meeting convened by ECIS in London to discuss collaboration between different agencies and organisations with overlapping international school-related interests.

From discussions at the Bath seminar arose the notion that an international conference should be organised to which all with an interest in international education would be welcome to contribute. Thus were the seeds sown and cultivated for the concept of an 'alliance for international education' – the term 'international education' being inclusive in welcoming participation by not only international school teachers and administrators but also those in universities and other educational organisations, as well as in the growing number of schools in national systems that were by this time promoting concepts such as global citizenship that were clearly addressing similar ideas to those addressed by many international schools – albeit using different terminology. At the November 2001 ECIS annual conference a well-attended session led by a number of those present at the Bath seminar followed up the proposed notion of an 'alliance for international education', which helped to clarify how the concept should be taken forward.

Conferences

The idea of a major international conference was turned into a reality when the University of Bath and the International Baccalaureate Organization collaborated to organise the inaugural conference of the Alliance for International Education, held at the International Conference Centre Geneva between 11th and 13th September, 2002. The 2½ day conference attracted over 200 participants to a mixture of plenary sessions complemented by small group sessions arranged around five themed 'strands'. The enthusiasm with which the conference was met made clear the appetite that existed, across the large and loosely-grouped constituency of those with an interest in international education, for such a forum for debate – and the desire to repeat the experience. In order to bring the idea of an Alliance to a wider audience, and to seek input into ideas for its development, presentations were made and discussions led at further ECIS conferences from November 2002 onwards.

And so it was that between 1st and 3rd October 2004 the second Alliance for International Education (AIE) conference was hosted by the International School of Düsseldorf. Following a similar format to that of the Geneva conference, the same well-received balance was struck between a relatively small amount of time devoted to plenary sessions and a greater emphasis on smaller strand sessions.

Unusual, if not unique, in international school-related conferences at that time, the AIE strand structure initiated from the outset has remained a characteristic feature of conferences to this day, undoubtedly being instrumental in eliciting the very positive response from participants through its expectation that, rather than move through a number of separate and unrelated conference sessions, participants should remain within one strand for the duration of the conference. This facilitates the cumulative nature of discussion as different members of the strand make their presentations and add their contribution to the growing group engagement with the issues in question.

Key to this model, then as in subsequent years, has been the strand leaders – invited to take on the role on the basis of their demonstrated experience and expertise in organising and chairing presentation and discussion, who also summarise the strand discussions in the final conference plenary session as a means of sharing with all participants an overview of the activities and ideas in which each group of strand participants have engaged.

The undoubted success of the Düsseldorf conference gave all involved even greater confidence that a need existed for the forum the AIE could provide, and a pattern was established of offering a conference in alternate years, to be organised in different locations internationally.

The same essential structure was followed of majorly focusing on strand-based discussion – what has been more recently described as a 'talking conference' rather than a 'listening conference' – supplemented latterly by the inclusion in each conference of an 'Alliance Assembly' session where Trustees provide information for, and answer questions from, participants about Alliance developments.

Thus the 2002 and 2004 Geneva and Düsseldorf conferences were followed by conferences hosted by Yew Chung International School Shanghai (27-29 October 2006), Enka Schools Istanbul (24-26 October 2008), the Centre for Strategic Education International Education Advisory Group Melbourne (7-9 July 2010), the International School of London Qatar (20-22 October 2012), Ecole Mondiale World School Mumbai (10-12 October 2014) and, most recently, NIST International School Bangkok (24-26 February 2016).

Organisational structure
While the structure and nature of the AIE conferences has remained essentially unchanged from the outset, with the effectiveness of the model reinforced by each successive conference, other aspects of the AIE have evolved over the years. As it became increasingly clear that the first conference was going to be more than a 'one off' event, discussions continued as to what exactly the nature and purpose of the Alliance should be and, at the 2004 Düsseldorf conference, the first formal AIE statement of purpose was agreed. Also increasingly clear was that the group of volunteers who had taken forward the coordination and organisation of activities would need to have formal status of some sort.

Though not obvious for an international grouping of this type which location should be looked to for formal recognition, the issue was resolved when, on 5th February 2007, the Alliance for International Education was granted formal charitable status by the UK Charity Commission, with a Board of Trustees and the facility afforded by its new formal status of opening its own bank account – an important development in the context of conference organisation and the collection of registration fees and disbursement of associated expenses.

At this point the group of volunteers who had so far been described very loosely as the Conference Organising Team became the group of Trustees. The first Chair of Trustees was Professor Jeff Thompson, followed by Terry Haywood from October 2008 to September 2011, before Jeff Thompson resumed that role which he holds to the present day. Also formalised were the positions of Vice Chair (Beatrice Caston), Treasurer (Wilf Stout, followed by Norm Dean) and Executive Secretary (Beatrice Caston, now Darlene Fisher).

In organising conferences from its earliest days, administrative support was provided by the school or other organisation hosting the conference with, in the early years, some additional administrative support from the University of Bath. From October 2012, through financial support provided by the International School of London Group, a small amount of paid administrative support has supplemented the voluntary work of the Trustees.

AIE chapters
Addressed from the earliest days of the AIE has been what might be described as the 'legacy issue'. Rather than being essentially a caravan of expatriates travelling around the world from conference to conference, it has always been intended that the AIE should have representation and impact in different locations, linked or otherwise to the 'world conferences' hosted in alternate years.

Thus was the concept of AIE chapters created, which would exist in their own right – under the auspices of the AIE overall – and coordinate AIE-related activities in-country to complement the main AIE world conferences. Four AIE chapters have been established to date, beginning with the Middle East chapter. Initially successful in organising seminars and mini-conferences, the chapter has more recently been dormant as the main expatriate protagonists relocated to other parts of the world. The possibility still exists of the chapter being revived, as has happened with the UK chapter. Active for some three years before a number of the organisers relocated, the UK chapter is currently in the process of reviving as new AIE enthusiasts become involved.

More sustainable has been the chapter founded in China following the 2006 Shanghai conference. Established under the auspices of the Yew Chung Education Foundation, host to the main conference, the administrative support and resources provided by Yew Chung, taken with the stability provided by the main protagonists being of the country rather than expatriates with less permanent links, have undoubtedly been contributory factors to the success of the China chapter – which organises its own local conference in advance of each world conference, and encourages chapter conference presenters to consider participating also in the subsequent global event. The success of the China chapter augurs well for the newest chapter, based in Australia, which was approved by the AIE Board of Trustees in February 2016.

Issues and challenges
The transition from 'good idea' to full-blown operation in any organisation is rarely without challenge, and the AIE is no exception. One theme

running through discussions from the earliest days of the Alliance to the present day has been exactly how its purpose – of bringing together those committed to advancing international education and intercultural understanding to develop ideas and practices through sharing and exploring their similarities and differences – should be implemented, and how ambitious it should attempt to be.

Linked to such questions has been debate about whether the nature of the Alliance, as essentially an association run by volunteers, should more appropriately be replaced by a more business-focused model with a chief executive and employees. One forum at which questions of this nature have been discussed was the November 2002 ECIS conference, at which Terry Haywood led a session where, drawing on discussions including those at the inaugural Geneva conference, he proposed a number of different models on which the Alliance might be structured (Hayden & Haywood, 2003).

In fact the Alliance has continued to operate on essentially the same organisational model as initially created: run by a group of volunteers with a small amount of administrative support, together with additional administrative support for conference organisation from the host institution. The model has advantages, not least in that it is true to the AIE's earliest commitment to avoid becoming one more membership organisation in a context where many such organisations already operate. There are, however, disadvantages associated with reliance on enthusiastic volunteers who are already committed professionally elsewhere – ironically, the very reason that they are well-placed to deploy the roles they have taken on.

And while enthusiasm, a shared commitment to the Alliance 'cause', and good relationships between trustees have no doubt been effective in bringing the AIE to the point where in April 2016 it has organised eight very successful 'world conferences' as well as establishing a number of regional chapters, there are questions to be addressed about how to ensure the longer term sustainability of an organisation that relies on good will and voluntary effort for its existence.

An associated issue, raised regularly since the earliest days of the Alliance, is whether it should become more formally a membership organisation that charges membership fees. In effect, the AIE has to date been a membership organisation whose members are those who attend its conferences, and whose membership fee is included in the conference registration fee.

To establish a more formal system of membership fee collection would not only require additional administrative capacity; it would also raise (quite reasonable) expectations amongst members as to what they might

expect to receive in return. While many possibilities have been discussed over the years (including, for instance, regular newsletters), providing such a service requires, again, additional administrative support – and thus a change in the nature of the organisational infrastructure.

It has already been noted that regional AIE chapters provide a less transient grounding for the AIE than that provided by conferences hosted in a different location each time, and it has always been the intention of those involved in establishing the AIE and subsequently organising its conferences that they should reach out not only to those expatriates who are able to travel to different locations, but also to educators in the host country in which a particular conference is being held.

Such aspirations are clearly more challenging in some contexts than others. By 'local teachers', for instance, do we mean only those teaching in international schools and, if not, will the conference focus be relevant for teachers in state-funded education systems? There is also the question of language; when the AIE 'working language' is English, should there be an expectation that simultaneous translation of all sessions will always be provided at conferences held in countries where local teachers are unlikely to be English speakers (as has already happened successfully at some conferences)? And not least among the issues is the question of whether local teachers in some locations will be able to fund the cost of the registration fee. Some conferences, through the host school, have been successful in raising funds to provide sponsorship for local participants, but the extent to which such funding can be raised will clearly vary.

These then are some of the issues that face the Alliance and which will no doubt continue to be debated as the Alliance moves forward and develops – and, indeed, as the environment in which it functions (the international school sector and the promotion of international education in state-funded education systems) develops and grows.

Whatever the future might hold, what seems certain is that the Alliance for International Education has already made an impressive contribution, in its first 15 years, to the promotion of international education worldwide. The high quality debate and discussion facilitated between teachers, administrators, university researchers and others with interests in international education; the highly effective strand structure which has more recently been emulated by other organisations hosting conferences for international educators; the sharing of professional development opportunities between those with links to a range of international education organisations; the enormous enthusiasm shared by AIE trustees, organisers and conference participants; and the involvement – introduced latterly to conference structure – of students

from the host school not only in supporting the conference organisation but also actively participating in both strand and plenary sessions: all these features augur well for the future of the Alliance. The most recent conference, hosted by NIST International School Bangkok between 26 and 28 February 2016, exemplified all of these characteristics. In moving forward, we have every reason to expect that future Alliance for International Education conferences will do so too.

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