

# Chamber Chronicles:

## British School of Brussels

*The British Chamber of Commerce EU | Belgium aims to serve as a gateway for business and trade between the UK and the EU. Many of our members offer services in both markets and add to the Chamber's ability to provide value added support for EU-UK exchange. In this issue of the Chamber Chronicles, we speak with the British School of Brussels. Located in Tervuren, 20 minutes outside of Brussels and the EU institutions, the school has acquired a diverse, international student body and is one of Europe's top performing schools.*



**Name:** Melanie Warnes

**Role:** CEO & Principal

**Hobbies:** Going to art galleries, concerts, and eating the great Belgian food!

**One thing British you love:** The self-deprecating humour

**Melanie, you are originally from the UK, tell us, how did you end up working at the British School of Brussels (BSB) and what motivated you to join?**

A role I had in the UK was as a National Leader of Education, a Department for Education-approved role. This was for leaders of outstanding schools that had the ability to share their practices with other organisations. I worked a lot in supporting other school leaders, particularly leadership teams in the areas of culture, professional learning, and standards. As a result of this I secured a 9-month secondment to PWC's London-based public sector consultancy team, but my heart is in schools, so I decided that I wanted to go back to working in a school, but it was a useful experience to look at education through a commercial and policy lens. The post at BSB came up and I was looking to move internationally as I had done a lot of international work in a consultancy capacity and enjoyed this. So, everything came together when the job at BSB came up. I am very comfortable living in Belgium. It is a very easy country to live in and Brussels is very welcoming to expats. There is a great mixture of nationalities and Brussels seems to take having foreigners and expats in its stride.



**What?** International school with 1350 students from 70 nationalities, including three pre-university routes: A levels, IB and BTEC

**Why?** To be an educational force for good

**Goal?** To develop confident, caring, and courageous people who engage actively, ethically, and respectfully with the world around us



**In your words, how would you explain the BSB? How is it different from other schools?**

All schools say that they are caring, but it is clear to us, and anyone that visits, that everything about BSB is organised around genuinely and deeply knowing our students, caring for them, and working with them at their pace in order for them to be happy, succeed and be the best version of themselves. The idea is that the school adapts to suit the child, and not the other way around, the latter is often a feature in other schools. Moreover, many schools say they care for the whole child, and at BSB this is particularly true. We have a holistic education, in that we prioritise the heart, hand and soul as highly as the academic, equally weighting those things. To put it bluntly, we are not an exam factory. We are a fee-paying school, but we do not select by academic ability. We also have the best level of physical and human resources to enable a great education.

***The idea is that BSB adapts to suit the child not the other way around, which is often a feature in schools.***

**Are most of the staff Belgian?**

Most teaching staff are either UK nationals trained in the UK, or they are from British and international schools with strong UK and international qualifications. The support staff are a range of internationals and Belgian nationals.

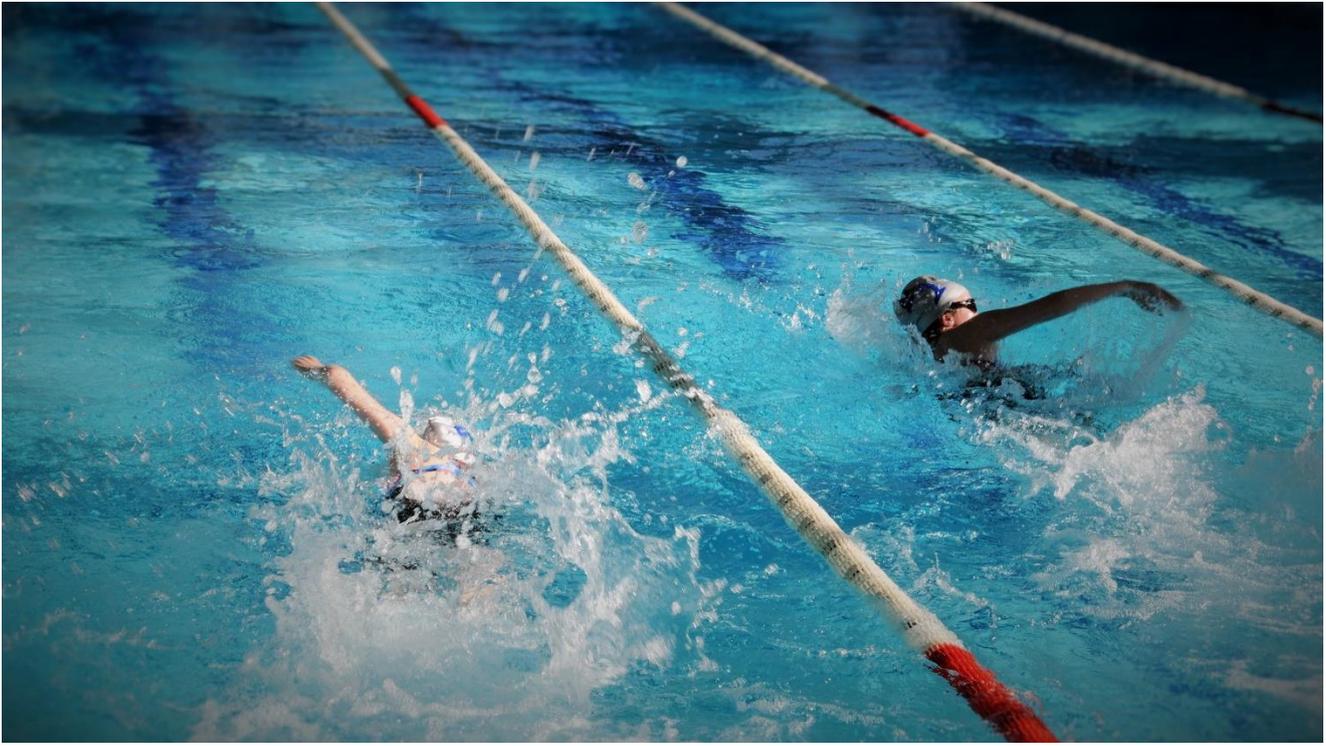
**How big is the UK student body?**

Less than 30% of students are British or declare one of their nationalities as British. We have taken in 50 Ukrainian refugee students, and American and Belgian students are the next biggest groups. Overall, our student body has more than 70 nationalities.

**What are your personal goals for the school?**

All children irrespective of their ability do really well, so we value each child participating, but we also want to support those children who have the potential for elite performance to reach that. One of my ambitions when I came here was that, as a school, we would be able to say that irrespective of their starting point that each child can achieve the best they can and be the best person they can be. For example, we opened a competitive sized swimming pool in 2016 and we made an ambition that every child who comes to BSB would learn how to swim, whilst also building a competitive standard swimming club. We have achieved both of those things and as a consequence we are winning international swimming competitions. We are becoming globally recognised in sport and one benefit of that recognition is the attraction of high-level staff. For instance, our PE teachers include former Olympic swimmers, international footballers, and national gymnastic coaches. Similarly, we have students winning prizes for music. Academically, we are the top performing school in Belgium, and included in the rankings as one of the top 100 schools in the world.

***I think that what I want BSB to be remembered for is that no matter what their ability is, the student can achieve the absolute best they can achieve and be the best person they can be.***



### **Given the international presence of students, is the turnover rate high?**

Our average turnover of students is about 25% which is average for an international school. Many of our parents will be here on a 3–5-year contract then move on, so it is really important to us that we get to know the child as quickly as possible, and that the induction of students is swift and genuine. The feedback we get from parents and students is that within days, children feel at home here. Our students get used to making friends every year, they are adaptable and flexible. Our student turnover is typical of an international school, but our staff turnover isn't. Our staff turnover is about 10% which is really healthy for a business, and it is almost always positive turnover e.g., promotions or relocations. This means that the school has a very stable environment, and our strong ethos is handed over from one generation to the next. This ethos has existed since the school's foundation in 1970 and has passed on year-on-year and is maintained as a stable community for a child, allowing students to thrive.

### **Do the different cultures amongst students make it difficult to establish an integrated culture around the school?**

The very clear values of BSB are rooted in cultural sensitivity, inclusivity, and diversity. The other part is being really communicative on what we stand for so that we can be clear with parents what culture they are coming into when their child enters the school. Our curriculum is based on relational learning and the UNESCO: to know, to do, to live and to be. It is about knowing oneself and knowing others as well as knowledge and skills. There are cultural differences such as differing mannerisms but there are also a lot of cultural behaviours that are universal, and we spend a lot of time with students working together so that we can draw out those experiences. The school is a like a village - there will be disputes between neighbours, but it is about sitting down and hearing those different experiences and learning from them.

### **How do you keep high employee retainment and a strong working culture?**

All schools will say that all decisions are made for the good of the student and what a lot of schools pay less attention to is making decisions for the good of the staff. For a business to thrive you need to recruit the best people, and in order to recruit the best people you not only need to have good processes, but you really need to know who you are and know who fits. Our recruitment processes are all rooted in our core values, what we call our Guiding Statements. We recruit the best qualified people, but what is more important to us is the fit between the employee and the BSB culture. We strive to recruit individuals that fit with us, work with us in the way we work, and see relationships in the way that we do. The second matter is *keeping* those individuals and replicating that culture day in day out. We spend a big proportion of our time and income on professional learning, which doesn't just mean training courses and conferences, but also coaching and research. **This means that we are able to keep a lot of people**

**because staff at BSB know they will be professionally nourished and become more of an expert in their field.** The other part is our approach to leadership. I believe that any leader in our school needs to treat the people they lead as importantly as their own family. Every decision we make is like a family and well-motivated people tend to work to a higher standard. If you walk into a busy restaurant and the staff do not make eye contact or don't bring you a menu, you already don't have a good feeling about that restaurant, and the quality of the food matters less. A child's day is going to be more positive if their interactions with people are consistently and universally positive and happy.



### **What is the engagement with parents like?**

We have a really active parent association called the Families of BSB and there is a mixture of nationalities on the committee. They are strongly involved in the community of BSB and try to make connections and interactions all the time. It was remarkable that within 24 hours we had van loads of donations for our appeal to Ukraine for example. FoBSB are active and supportive.

### **Where do students typically end up post-education at BSB?**

The vast majority (over 95%) go to university, mainly in the UK. A significant number go to the USA, and we've noticed a big increase in students going to the Netherlands and Belgium. A small proportion take a gap year and a slightly smaller proportion take up apprenticeships, but this is growing. Very few go directly into employment and those that do a gap year normally have deferred a university place.

### **Finally, has UK's withdrawal from the EU affected your business?**

Because our client base is very diverse, we don't solely depend on British industry for our student population, so we haven't seen many direct negative impacts from Brexit. The biggest challenge for us has been around work permits for UK nationals who are teachers. We really focus on getting our appointments ready so that our staff are able to start in September when the school year begins but this is a challenge. We used to have UK interns from UK universities who would spend a year with us in our IT department as technicians but post-Brexit, this is currently impossible to do. Thirdly, a lot of our teaching resources were purchased from the UK, and we are now trying to source elsewhere. It is a shame as many of these companies are not big companies, but the quality is high, and we want to continue doing business with them. Import duties make this very hard. We also offer A Levels, BTECs and IB and I hope that the fluidity for international students to go and study in the UK will get easier as UK universities really are exceptional.



To learn more about the British School of Brussels, check out their webpage <https://www.britishschool.be/> or get in touch with [Admissions@britishschool.be](mailto:Admissions@britishschool.be).

*Thanks for welcoming us BSB!*

*We look forward to continuing our Chamber Chronicles series where we get the opportunity to meet our members and hear more about their story.*

CONNECT | ENGAGE | BELONG

---

Boulevard Bischoffsheim 11 - 1000 Brussels Belgium - T +32 (0)2 540 90 30 - [info@britcham.eu](mailto:info@britcham.eu)  
[www.britcham.eu](http://www.britcham.eu) - VAT BE455.006.907 - Bank 310-1391540-64 - IBAN BE29 3101 3915 4064 - SWIFT/BIC BBRUBEBB