

## WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN AN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL?

There are various ways in which to gather information to help in making the right choice. Increasingly, schools publish a great deal of information on their websites and this is often the first port of call for prospective parents. Without doubt the best way to find out about what a school is like is to pay a visit. This is not always geographically possible, but many schools are instead happy to provide answers to questions via email.

Below there are ten key questions (by no means are there only ten!) that should be considered. After each aspect has been briefly outlined, there is information explaining the approach at Lanna. Far more detailed information about most of the questions appears on the school website and/or in various publications available from school.

This list is not in order of priority. Naturally some aspects will be more important to some parents than others.

### 1. WHAT TYPE OF CURRICULUM DOES THE SCHOOL OFFER AND HOW ARE STUDENTS ASSESSED?

There are different approaches regarding curriculum content and teaching styles in international schools worldwide; in some cases the curriculum on offer might largely match that of a particular country, but with local features. For example, the curriculum on offer in an international school in Thailand could be very similar to that offered in the USA, but Thai language and culture classes would also feature. A school might create its own curriculum, selecting different aspects from a number of different styles. Good schools publish curriculum documents outlining their programmes.

There are different types of assessment, with good teachers constantly noting progress made and looking at ways in which to help students improve in different areas. Some schools feature more formal internationally standardised assessment in addition to that done by the teacher and publish results or details. Other schools are less open about their assessment methods and results. A lack of openness should be a warning sign to parents.

The British curriculum offered at Lanna is very similar to that on offer in a good school in England.

In the Primary School, we follow Cambridge Primary, which provides an excellent framework with a focus on developing skills in key subject areas. Cambridge Primary English encourages learners to communicate confidently and effectively and to develop critical skills. The mathematics curriculum framework explores: number, geometry, measure, handling data and problem solving. This curriculum focuses on principles, patterns, systems, functions and relationships so that learners can develop a holistic understanding of mathematics. The Science curriculum framework covers: scientific enquiry, biology, chemistry and physics. Environmental awareness and Sustainability Studies are also important parts of the curriculum.

In Years 7 to 9 (11-14 years old) our lower Secondary curriculum builds on the Primary curriculum and develops skills and knowledge across a wide range of subjects. These three years form an important bridge from leaving the Primary school in Year 6 to beginning exam classes in Year 10.

Students in Years 10 and 11 follow externally set and assessed courses based around a highly regarded system known as the IGCSE. Our two year IGCSE courses and examinations are provided by Cambridge International Examinations (CIE). They are designed to develop high academic standards and they are academically demanding courses. The programme is globally recognised to be one of the best academically rigorous programmes of study for students of this age.

In Years 12 and 13, students study CIE Advanced Level courses (A Levels). Currently Lanna offers twenty different A Level courses; many more than most comparably sized schools. A levels are one of the most recognised and respected high school qualifications in the world, Cambridge International Advanced level (A level) is widely viewed as representing a “gold standard” and is accepted as proof of academic ability worldwide. Good grades at A level can be the key to admission to the world’s major English speaking universities.

CIE courses are now followed by over 9,000 schools in more than one hundred and sixty countries. Lanna students have been excelling at all levels of Cambridge assessment. See the pass rates under the Academic Achievement section of the school website.

## 2. WHAT ABOUT THE TEACHING STAFF?

Everybody likes to see an attractive campus, but well qualified teachers, ideally with some international experience, are essential. School websites often feature photo galleries of staff or list staff names, their qualifications and teaching and other responsibilities within the school. Some websites offer additional information about teachers, others provide very little information. A staff list predominantly featuring young, fairly inexperienced teachers could be an indication that the school owner regards cheaper as better.

Try to find out whether there is good staff retention. International schools naturally have some teachers moving on each year, but regular movement of 20% or more increases instability and is probably an indication of other problems in the school.

Lanna provides comprehensive information about all of its teachers and assistant teachers, including qualifications and experience and comments written by the staff. The staff is well qualified, with a healthy mix of ages and nationalities and people generally stay for many years. There are some teachers who have moved on from Lanna and then returned, which is not common on the international circuit. Reading through the 'Meet the Staff' section on the school website, it is clear that teachers are very happy to be at Lanna.

## 3. IS THE SCHOOL ACCREDITED?

Many good international schools are officially accredited. This might be an accreditation awarded by the host country, but in addition it is a good sign for schools to have been accredited by reputable international agencies. The accreditation process involves quite a detailed analysis of whether schools do what they claim to do and usually there is a visit by a small team of qualified inspectors, with a detailed report made publicly available. Part of the report usually involves the identification of aspects in which a school might improve. The accreditation process is repeated on a cyclical basis.

Being an examination centre does not mean that a school has been accredited it simply means that they have been granted permission to host examinations for a particular examining organisation.

Lanna is licensed by the Thai Ministry of Education and is fully accredited by The Western Association of Schools and Colleges ([WASC](#)) for Nursery Years through to Year 13. WASC is an accreditation organization responsible for accrediting many international schools in Asia, as well as schools in California and Hawaii.

In 2005 Lanna gained the status of becoming a [CIE](#) (Cambridge international Examinations) examinations centre, enabling us to offer a full range of IGCSE and AS/A level courses. [CIE](#) is part of the University of Cambridge and is the world's largest provider of international examinations for 14 to 19 year olds.

#### 4. HOW IS THE SCHOOL GOVERNED?

Quite a large number of international schools are privately owned, often by someone with little or no experience of how to organize a school, and do not have a governing body or board of directors. More reputable establishments have some sort of governing body. School websites should feature details; if not, it is a good idea to ask the Head Teacher or Director of the school for details.

In March 2000 Lanna established an Advisory Board with the intention of improving the school's connections to its parents and the wider educational community. From the very beginning it has always had a strong parental representation. It meets regularly and the owners have given it the responsibility to oversee all the school's educational policies and procedures. It ensures that these programmes reflect the school's mission and vision and it has clearly defined evaluation procedures for the Director, Head of School and the Board itself. These structures go towards assuring continuity in the curriculum and the strategic planning for the school.

In 2013, in line with Thai Ministry policies, the Advisory Board became the school's Executive Board, thereby assuming the role of a governing body.

Input from parents is always welcomed.

#### 5. DOES THE SCHOOL HAVE GOOD FACILITIES AND RESOURCES?

Lovely buildings do not constitute a good school. Some parents only learn this some time after they have enrolled their children; some advance research can help to avoid making the wrong choice. Having said that, an attractive environment, swimming pools, expansive playing fields and multi-purpose theatres can really add to the quality of school life.

Good teachers, sufficient teaching resources and reasonably sized classes are the most important factors in making for a good school experience. Look beyond the surface and don't be tricked by a beautiful facade; it may be an expensive facade with little substance behind.

Lanna's buildings and classrooms are well decorated and well maintained. Resources are current and plentiful and classrooms are large enough for the reasonable numbers in each group. We have well equipped Science labs and IT rooms, a swimming pool, a covered sports area and two open sports areas, plus a Drama studio and a hall which is used for productions, assemblies, etc.

Lanna is not the most obviously appealing campus but it is pleasant and compact and most visitors comment on the friendly atmosphere.

#### 6. HOW WELL DOES THE SCHOOL COMMUNICATE WITH PARENTS?

Parents understandably have concerns and questions, and a good school should be willing to communicate openly and regularly about their children and their learning progress.

Parents should have easy access to the child's teachers and responses to requests for information should be swift. Regular written reports about students' performance should be made and supported by parent-teacher conferences.

Good schools should provide clear information about such things as how to contact teachers, tuition and other fees, lunch and/or snack menus, school events, term dates and any unexpected changes in arrangements. Many schools issue newsletters regularly and archived copies can be found on school websites. A lot can be learned about a school by browsing through such publications. **Most importantly, the school should welcome and value communication with parents.**

Parents receive regular academic reports throughout the year and have opportunities to talk with teachers at the conferences. Teachers' contact details are publicised on the school website's Meet the Teachers page and parents are encouraged to make contact with any questions or suggestions.

Scheduled coffee mornings address a variety of interesting topics and there are many other social events involving teachers, parents and students – we have a very active Parent teacher Organisation (PTO) that plans many events including barbecues and bake sales.

The Lanna Quarterly, our student created magazine, is an impressive publication that showcases much of what happens in the school – all back issues are available on the school website. The school Facebook page also has lots of information about recent events.

Newsletters from the Head of School are sent out regularly to all parents and students. Monthly lunch menus are also sent out to all parents. We value communication and parent participation very highly.

## **7. WHAT IS THE DOMINANT CULTURE AND LANGUAGE OF THE SCHOOL?**

In some countries, international schools are only open to international students, with nationals of the host country not permitted to attend. In other countries, there is more freedom, thus many parents enrol their sons and daughters in international schools to benefit from a good education in general and, in particular, to improve their ability in English. Some international schools have few first language English speakers and high numbers of second language learners. Depending on how well this is organized, it can have an impact on the teaching and the pace at which material is covered and can mean that the dominant language of the school is not English.

The language of the classroom is English, although naturally Thai is heard at times around the school; after all, we are in Thailand. Lanna has students from more than twenty different countries. Many of our students come from parents of mixed nationalities – commonly with one Thai parent and the other of European or American descent. .

Lanna does accept some students into the Primary section of the school who still need to develop their command of English and they are provided with additional English support to encourage rapid development of English. Older prospective students who have not reached a good standard of English are unlikely to be offered a place in the school, as our higher level courses require a high level of English.

## **8. ARE THERE MANY EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES ?**

In addition to aiming for academic excellence, good schools present students with a wide range of experiences and challenges that combine to help the development of each individual. Many international schools feature field trips linked to the curriculum as well as a range of sports, musical and other activities, often on a weekly basis throughout the school year.

In addition to the wide variety of weekly activities over the school year, (details of activities currently offered are listed on the school website) there are many field trips, right from the Nursery classes! Year 6 students have a residential experience each year. There are residential Science trips for Years 7 and 9, plus a Science/Humanities trip for Year 10 students. Every second year there is also a very popular extended weekend camping trip for Secondary students.

There are school dramatic productions every year, with recent Primary School productions including Alice in Wonderland and Fantastic Mr Fox, and Secondary students have performed Robin Hood, Sweeney Todd, Animal Farm, Mamma Mia and The Pilgrimage.

We have a large number of sports fixtures with other local international schools and there are

various in-school house team competitions as well. We compete in football, basketball, volleyball, futsal, badminton, swimming and cross-country running – from Primary school right up through the school. We have a very busy sports calendar.

A school orchestra is also now developing, along with a number of ensembles and other student bands. Students learn a great deal in our classrooms but the wide variety of extra-curricular experiences adds hugely to their education.

## **9. WHAT IS THE ADMISSIONS PROCESS?**

If you have the money to pay fees, for some schools that is all that is needed to satisfy the admissions procedure. Better schools typically ask prospective students to sit some form of entrance assessment, with some also using non-verbal reasoning tests. It is likely that one or two of the most recent school reports will be requested and in many cases, some sort of interview is likely to be required, although sometimes there will naturally be geographical restrictions and sometimes a place will be offered based on other information provided. The admissions process can be a bit nerve wracking for children (and often more so for parents) but most schools make it fairly friendly. There is usually a fee payable for the admissions process.

Lanna's admissions process involves testing for English proficiency and in some cases includes a non-verbal reasoning test. Reports from previous schools are also required before an offer of placement will be considered. In addition, we like to meet parents and children, show them around the school and let them visit classrooms to see the school in action. We are very happy to do this as it lets parents and children see what Lanna is like on a regular school day.

Very young students applying for our Early Years classes usually spend some time in classrooms prior to joining the class but are not formally tested.

## **10. HOW MUCH DOES IT COST?**

This seems a simple enough question but information is not always readily available and parents can be surprised to find out at a later stage that there are other, hidden costs. Some schools make it very clear from the outset but extra charges for books, examination entries and many other things can add substantial amounts to the cost. Many schools expect a non-refundable payment on entry to the school and some refund some costs on departure. Check the small print!

Lanna's fees are set at a reasonable level and we avoid having hidden extras; all Checkpoint, IGCSE and A level entry fees are included within the fees at Lanna.