

# BRITISH SCHOOLS REPORT

**ISC** RESEARCH

*Executive Summary*  
2024- 2025



*Produced by ISC Research for*

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# INTRODUCTION

This report was produced as an attempt to understand **the reasons that make Spain the largest host of British Schools in Europe**, hosting nearly as many as the rest of EU countries together.

This summary report has been produced with the permission of ISC Research using their proprietary data and insights. It is based on a full internal report developed by ISC Research and has been prepared for wider distribution to share key findings.



# REPORT OBJECTIVES

The report examines the strength, size, and reputation of British schools in Spain<sup>1</sup>, analysing the factors that have contributed to their historical success and provides a comprehensive assessment of the economic, social, and educational impact of British schools.



The key objectives of this report include:

**01**

Assessing the impact and influence of British schools in Spain.

**02**

Evaluating which historical factors have influenced the strength, size and reputation of British schools in Spain.

**03**

Identifying the circumstances that have enabled the current success of British schools in Spain.

**04**

Assessing British Schools contribution to local economies.

**05**

Identifying main challenges and opportunities for growth and sustainability.

**06**

Examining how British schools have affected educational landscape in Spain and educational relations between UK and Spain.

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this report, a British school in Spain is one that offers the national curriculum of England and Wales. Outside Spain and for ISC Research, a British school is one that offers one or more of the following curricula. UK, CAM, IPC, IMYC, IEYC.



## KEY FINDINGS

The research demonstrates the significant and sustained impact of British schools in Spain, which continue to thrive as leaders in academic excellence, cultural exchange, and economic contribution. By addressing the objectives outlined above, the findings provide a compelling narrative of their success, adaptability, and future potential.

Emerging trends throughout the research reinforce the schools' enduring relevance and alignment with global educational priorities. A university representative further confirmed that students from British schools excel in teamwork and problem-solving, though their advanced skill set can sometimes challenge the traditional, memory-based approaches of some Spanish universities.





## KEY FINDINGS

### 1.- Assessing the impact and influence of British Schools in Spain

The research highlights the significant role British Schools play in Spain's educational landscape as well as fostering UK education exports. British schools are widely respected for their rigorous curricula and examination systems, including A-Levels and GCSEs, their focus on bilingualism, and their holistic approach to teaching. These qualities, coupled with the global acceptance of UK qualifications by Spanish universities and employers, reinforce their reputation for academic excellence and sustain their appeal across diverse communities. They generate economic and social value within Spain and the UK through the creation of employment opportunities, support of local businesses, and driving demand for UK exports such as educational materials, examinations, and technologies. British Schools also play a vital role in fostering cultural exchange and bilingualism, hence enriching the communities they serve. Their impact extends to higher education, where they prepare globally minded, well-rounded students who excel in universities in Spain, the UK, and beyond.

### Conclusion

The findings reveal that British schools in Spain are distinguished by a rigorous curricula, internationally recognised qualifications and bilingual education models. These elements underpin their reputation for academic excellence and their ability to equip students with essential skills such as creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration. These qualities, as substantiated by the 2023 UNESCO and the World Economic Forum, are increasingly identified as fundamental for the future workforce. The report highlights creativity and critical thinking as core competencies for the jobs of the future, aligning perfectly with the strengths of British education.

## 2. Historical and current factors influencing strength, size and reputation

British schools in Spain trace their origins back to the early 20th century, initially established to serve the expatriate community, particularly families of British diplomats. Over time, the reputation of these schools for academic excellence and bilingualism began to attract local Spanish families and international residents, marking the start of their expansion beyond the expatriate population. As trusted centres of learning and cultural exchange, British schools in Spain have evolved from small expatriate-serving institutions into globally respected educational hubs, blending British academic traditions with Spanish cultural integration.

**The mid- to late 20th century saw significant growth**, as Spain's opened up to internationalisation and the rising demand for English-language education provided fertile ground for British and international schools alike. The creation of the National Association of British Schools in Spain (NABSS) in 1978 to regulate and support British schools was instrumental in this growth, providing a framework for collaboration and creating, jointly with British Council, a quality assurance system approved by Spanish authorities. By the late 20th century, the integration of Spain into the European Union and its growing appeal as a destination for expatriates accelerated the growth of British schools.

The regulatory framework for these schools is governed by Royal Decree 806/1993, which stipulates that foreign schools in Spain must satisfy legal requirements in their country of origin and that the education provided must be officially recognised.

### **Conclusion**

The research demonstrates that British schools in Spain have evolved from serving expatriate communities to becoming hubs of international education that cater to both local and global families. Historically, their growth has been supported by the increasing demand for English language education and the strategic support of organisations like NABSS and British Council, including the creation of a British school in 1940. Contemporary factors, such as Brexit, have introduced challenges, but the research shows that these schools have successfully navigated such complexities by maintaining strong collaborations with regulatory bodies and continuing to deliver high-quality education.

### 3. Identifying and explaining the circumstances enabling British Schools in Spain success

British schools in Spain have established a strong reputation for excellence and adaptability, driven by their focus on quality education, internationally recognised qualifications, and innovative practices.

Several key factors contribute to their success:

- First and foremost, the focus on **English proficiency** remains a significant appeal for families. Their bilingual or multilingual approach is a hallmark of British schools in Spain, where students often graduate with proficiency in multiple languages, including Spanish and English, and exposure to additional languages like French, German, or Chinese.
- Another cornerstone is the **British curriculum** itself, which is lauded for its flexibility, adaptability, and skills-based focus. The curriculum emphasises critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity, contrasting with the content-heavy, memory-based approach of traditional Spanish education systems. The qualifications offered are globally recognised and highly respected, providing students with seamless access to top universities in Spain, the UK, and worldwide.
- Findings indicate that British schools enjoy a **well-established reputation for high academic standards**, reinforced by strong alumni networks that contribute to the schools' credibility. Furthermore, families perceive British schools as "gateways to global opportunities for their children".
- Leaders also highlighted **the role of community and student well-being** in the success of British schools. Many families are drawn to the supportive, inclusive environments these schools foster, where pastoral care and emotional well-being are integrated into the educational framework: "visitors often comment on how happy the students are and the sense of belonging in our schools"
- Finally, British schools have demonstrated **resilience and adaptability in navigating challenges**, including those posed by Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders noted that despite uncertainties surrounding the recognition of UK qualifications and university admissions post-Brexit, schools worked collaboratively to reassure families and maintain confidence.



## **Conclusion**

The success of British schools in Spain is rooted in their ability to adapt to changing demands while maintaining high standards. The research highlights how these schools integrate modern educational practices, such as fostering critical thinking and creativity, alongside holistic student development.

Their willingness to embrace innovation—whether through bilingual programmes, digital tools, or sustainability initiatives—further ensures their continued success. By offering an education that combines academic rigour with the development of global competencies, these schools attract families seeking future-ready educational experiences for their children.

## **4.- Assessing British Schools contribution to local economies**

British schools in Spain significantly bolster local economies through job creation and demand for services. They employ a diverse workforce, stimulating economic activity within their communities. They attract expatriate families, leading to increased demand for housing, local services and retail businesses.

Beyond economy, British schools play a fundamental role in fostering cultural integration, community engagement and global perspectives. Acting as bridges between local and expatriate communities, these schools create environments where diverse cultures interact and thrive, including strong participation in local charities and events and providing a gateway to international opportunities for the communities where they settle in.

## **Conclusion**

The research demonstrates that British schools in Spain make substantial contributions to local economies. They generate employment, stimulate demand for goods and services, and support the export of UK educational materials and technologies.

In addition to these economic impacts, the findings highlight the schools' role in fostering cultural exchange and bilingualism, which enhances community engagement and integration. For example, their active collaboration with local organisations and their role as cultural bridges enrich both local and expatriate communities, further strengthening their socio-economic impact.

## 5.- Identifying opportunities for growth and sustainability

Participants in the study identified key opportunities for future growth. Enhancing collaboration with Spanish authorities through formal partnerships and joint educational initiatives, such as bilingual programmes and teacher exchanges, was seen as essential. Stakeholders also stressed showcasing the economic and cultural contributions of British schools to strengthen their local and national impact. Addressing post-Brexit challenges through clearer regulatory frameworks and improved family guidance, coupled with exploring innovative educational pathways and leveraging the strengths of the British curriculum, were recognised as ways to adapt to changing needs. Strengthening the role of organisations like the British Council, NABSS or the British Chamber of Commerce was also highlighted as an opportunity to foster policy dialogue and provide strategic support for sustainability and growth.

### **Conclusion**

The research identifies several future opportunities for British schools in Spain to enhance their impact, maintain their competitive edge, and adapt to an evolving educational landscape. Some of the findings point to promising opportunities for growth and sustainability. Expanding language programmes to include high demand options like Mandarin and German could attract a broader demographic, while the integration of sustainability practices aligns with global educational priorities. Additionally, embracing digital innovation and personalised learning technologies would enhance their appeal to families seeking modern educational approaches.

The research also highlights the importance of strengthening partnerships with Spanish authorities and fostering deeper community ties to ensure long-term success.

## **6.- Examining the impact of British Schools in the educational landscape in Spain and on educational relations between the UK and Spain**

Spain primary and secondary education would not be the same without the few thousand “bilingual schools” (growing year on year). The first of these started in 1996 through an agreement by Ministry of Education and British Council (School). This initial programme, integrating language and culture and including 48 schools around Spain is still the reference model for the thousands of schools introduced by regional authorities.

### **Conclusion**

The analysis underscores the vital role British schools play in strengthening educational relations between the UK and Spain. Despite challenges posed by Brexit, collaboration among NABSS, the British Council, British Embassy and Spanish authorities has ensured the continued acceptance of UK qualifications and preserved student mobility. These efforts highlight the importance of strategic partnerships in maintaining the prestige of British education and ensuring access to higher education opportunities for students.

Below is a list of main recommendations extracted from focus groups to families, heads of schools and authorities.

## **Strategic action**

To maintain success, British Schools need strategic action. This will allow them to address regulatory challenges (whether or not these are Brexit related), rising tuition costs and increased competition from other international schools

## **Leverage the unique strengths of the British Curriculum**

To make the unique excellent characteristics of the British curriculum well known to families and universities. The curriculum offered by British schools is well aligned with UNESCO's 2023 report on global competencies, which highlights critical thinking and creativity as essential skills for the future, not yet fully embraced by Spanish universities nor is it totally integrated. This contrast suggests a broader opportunity for greater collaboration and innovation between secondary schools and higher education institutions.

## **Diversification of Offerings**

The growing demand for internationally recognised qualifications, such as the International Baccalaureate (IB), presents an opportunity for British schools to diversify their offerings.

## **Leveraging Multilingual Education for Global Readiness**

The increasing importance on multilingualism in education offers British schools the chance to further distinguish themselves.



## **Strengthening Community and Local Integration**

Partnerships with Spanish schools, local businesses, and cultural organisations could provide students with diverse learning experiences and enhance the schools' reputations as integral parts of their regions.

## **Recruiting and retaining high-quality educators**

remains a priority for British schools. Post-Brexit restrictions on hiring UK-trained teachers, as well as growing competition for a limited pool of qualified personnel, have prompted schools to explore new strategies, such as offering enhanced professional development and recruiting from other English-speaking countries.

## **Capitalising on Sustainability Initiatives**

Sustainability is becoming a defining feature of modern education, and British schools in Spain are well-positioned to integrate environmental awareness into their curricula.

## **Expanding Marketing and Visibility**

Lastly, British schools have an opportunity to enhance their visibility among Spanish families and other international communities. Survey data revealed that while the reputation of British schools is strong, misconceptions remain about their offerings compared to bilingual Spanish schools as well as lack of understanding of British Curriculum strengths (against IB).

# ANNEX 1 – Report Data

## (summary of the key data in the report)

The report is built around extensive data, which justifies and supports the main conclusions. This combines information normally held in ISC Research databases with specific data that was gathered throughout the research process leading up to the publication of the final report.

The following provides an overview of the specific areas for which data is provided in the report and summarises this evidence in terms of what it tells us about British schools in Spain.

Important note:

It is important to note that all of the data in the report refers to school campuses. Therefore, schools with multiple campuses are computed as though they were several different schools.

### **Number of British schools in Spain as compared to neighbouring countries (France, Italy and Portugal):**

There are almost 180 British school campuses in Spain, which is just over twice the number in the three neighbouring countries combined.

### **Growth of British schools in Spain:**

In the last five years, the number of schools has increased by almost 7% and the number of pupils on roll by almost 16%.

### **Proportion of international schools that are British:**

Over 40% of all the schools in Spain that offer international curricula are British. This is a very high percentage as schools are considered international if they teach in English, even if they do not offer any foreign curriculum other than IB, offered by many Spanish schools.

### **Number of pupils and distribution of these:**

The report referred to the cities, rather than regions, that have the most British schools. There are approximately 75000 pupils in total enrolled in British schools in Spain. Of these, almost one quarter are in Madrid. Valencia has around 7% of the total, while Barcelona, Las Palmas, Palma, Marbella and Malaga all have between 4% and 5%.

**Size of British schools:**

The size of the schools ranges from less than 100 pupils (around 20 schools) to slightly more than 2000 pupils (in the case of one school). The average number on roll is just over 400 pupils.

**Age range in schools:**

Just over half of the British schools in Spain cover the full range from infants to age 18. The others are specifically infants only, infants and primary or British up to age 16, offering a different curriculum in the 16 to 18 range.

**Curriculum offer:**

All British schools in Spain that cover the full age range offer the English national curriculum up to age 16, with IGCSE or GCSE qualifications. In the 16 to 18 age range the number of schools offering UK or international 'A' levels is approximately two and a half times the number offering the International Baccalaureate Diploma. (Schools that offer both qualifications are counted twice in the data provided.)

**Choice of examination boards:**

For GCSE/IGCSE qualifications, almost 80% of the schools use Cambridge and a similar number use Pearson Edexcel, with just over 20% currently using Oxford AQA or AQA. For 'A' level qualifications, just over 90% use Pearson Edexcel and just over 75% use Cambridge, with just over 20% using AQA. Obviously, a significant number of schools use more than one examination board.

**Accreditation and inspection:**

All British schools in Spain are inspected either by NIS (NABSS inspection service) or by a BSO inspectorate (ISI or Penta). Almost 90% of the schools are inspected by NIS, while just over 10% have BSO accreditation.

**Membership of British schools' associations**

Around 56% of the schools are members of NABSS, while almost 7% are members of COBIS and almost 5% members of AoBSO. (Schools may be members of more than one association). In terms of number of pupils on roll, almost 70% are in NABSS member schools.

**Schools that belong to groups:**

The data provided is for all international schools in Spain, not just British schools. In terms of the number of school campuses, the largest group who own British schools in Spain is Cognita. In terms of pupil numbers, the largest group is Inspired. Other groups that own a significant number of British schools in Spain are: Globeducate, International Schools Partnership and Dukes Education.

### **Pupil nationalities in British schools in Spain:**

ISC Research data was used to estimate the total percentages of each nationality in international schools in Spain. Spanish came out as the main nationality with around 87% of pupils. British pupils represent almost 10% of the total and the remaining nationalities just over 3%. However, the data only represented just over one quarter of all pupils in British schools and therefore the percentage figures have limited reliability.

### **Tuition fees:**

The report provided only the average fees, quoted in US dollars. The average British school in Spain has fees ranging from 7000 to 12000 dollars per year. School spending on teaching staff:

The report found that the proportion of each school's annual budget spent on teaching staff ranged from 40% to almost 90%, with the average being just under 70%.

### **Reputation of British schools in Spain:**

Surveys carried out as part of the research leading up to the report revealed that over 80% of parents with children in British schools considered the reputation of these schools to be either "Good" or "Excellent" when compared to national or international school alternatives. Over 90% of parents considered that their children were "Somewhat" or "Fully" prepared for UK universities and just under 80% felt their children were "Somewhat" or "Fully" prepared for Spanish universities.

### **Schools' perception of the reasons for their success:**

In response to the surveys, school leaders identified their ethos and culture as being the most

important factor leading to their success. This was followed by quality of teaching staff, curricula offer and examination results.



# RELEVANT DATA

**+ 180**

British Schools  
Campuses in Spain

**16%**

Increase in the number  
of pupils on roll

**+7%**

Increase in the number of  
schools in the past five years

**+ 75k**

Total number of pupils enrolled  
in British schools in Spain

