Future Thinking Innovators Award 2021

Shortlisted Initiative

International School of London, UK

Overview of the school:

The International School of London is a well-established International School that teaches all 3 IB programmes. Our mission is focused on building a welcoming and inclusive community, where learning experiences are driven by our diverse cultures and languages. Our extensive mother tongue language programme supports our approach.

We encourage active and responsible contributions in local and global communities. We are committed to reimagining education, taking learning beyond the walls of the classroom through innovative projects.

ISL has a family atmosphere. We give a voice to all members of our community, with active parent groups and a committed student government.

Summary of initiative:

The Research Institute is an entirely unique project that challenges Middle School students to produce original academic research that follows a master's structure. In this unique university level programme, we have found that adolescents have fewer barriers to finding information, and more opportunity for personalisation and understanding complex issues that matter to them. The students are aged between eleven and sixteen.

It's completely inclusive. The programme does not require any special selection of the most able students. It is designed to celebrate difference and young people's ability to adapt to change. We believe we have the first programme for international schools where students' own backgrounds are the basis for such in depth research.

The approach is entirely student-led. In the ISL RI, students genuinely use skills usually expected at university level, collaborating alongside research facilitators and a university academic mentor. This isn't just preparation for university; it can open eyes to new learner pathways that weren't visible before.

Mentoring is direct from university-based academics. Within any disciplinary community there is always someone who can apprentice the other. Universities provide apprenticeships for PhDs. Our University mentors provide apprenticeships for Research Institute participants.

The Research Institute pushes young people beyond imagined boundaries. At the end of the programme, students compile and present an academic paper based on their own experience and learning that broadly follows a master's format. We have seen our own students produce rigorous and original research.

How the initiative has encouraged students in lateral thinking for a specific purpose:

"I learnt that you have to be a very organised person to do this. There is lots of information to include and it's all over the place. So you need to be somebody who is able to put things together, take notes and then create something that makes sense." - RI student 2018-2019

Students learn early on that they need to 'put things together' themselves to answer their research questions. This means that creativity, problem-solving and lateral thinking are core skills in the RI – as they should be. In the Research Institute the students are not following a curriculum laid down by others, but instead work together to identify questions that are important to them and that have not been asked before. They encounter all the bumps, twists and dead-ends that professional researchers do – and learn that linear thinking can only get them so far.

We start every RI project with a guided exploration of the students' 'language stories' - an accessible way to articulate their experiences of being international. They share these stories, identify common themes and come up with ideas on how to take their learning further. In doing so, we apprentice them into thematic analysis and the generation of authentic research questions. It is part of our broader approach: recognising that each student is already an expert in their own life, and that young learners can generate questions that are meaningful to themselves and to the adults around them. This is the starting point for focused, creative and valuable scholarship.

How the initiative had impact on student learning with potential for longer-term development as a sustainable initiative for the school:

"It was very mature research rather than just on computers, on Google...going out to people, conducting interviews, finding the data, organising the data properly." - RI student 2016-2017

"I also learnt something about myself. Before the Research Institute, I wouldn't really focus on the little things like what languages I thought in, or dreamt in, or that I counted in. But when we started working on this I started concentrating on this little things" - RI student 2017-2018

These 'little things' are important: students quickly realise that they are responsible for every aspect of their RI project, way beyond meeting the teacher's curriculum goals. They experience it as 'mature'; we see it as unfiltered, authentic scholarship.

The longer-term sustainability can be seen in the project outputs. Our students have published their work in professional journals and have shared their findings at academic conferences (earning a standing ovation from the audience). The pride and enthusiasm this generates is infectious: when they talk about the Research Institute in assemblies, other students want to join. We have created opportunities for alumni to stay involved (older students act as an 'ethics board' to offer external scrutiny of project ideas) and our participants are increasingly active in the life of the school. Two previous projects looked at disfluencies in English before and after the summer holiday, and the languages students think in.

We are further developing the project so that more schools can participate, based on five 'design principles' and materials for new teams.

How the initiative demonstrates student commitment and a rigorous process for effective learning:

Our students and project-alumni are ambassadors for the Research Institute: they speak at assemblies to encourage students to sign up, they offer their time to advise new participants and they work incredibly hard to prepare their conference presentation and publications. Their academic mentor apprentices the participants into scholarship, holding them to the highest standards. We have developed five 'design principles' to describe this work, briefly summarised below:

1. It's not teaching. It's unteaching: In the RI, teachers are apprenticed into scholarship as much as the students are. That means you'll be sitting on your hands a fair bit, biting your tongue, and trying to be less 'helpful' for your students.
2. It's not learning. It's an apprenticeship: Students learn by doing, and in the process they build up research skills that most people normally learn at university.
3. Students are experts. It starts from their expertise: The teacher's job isn't to be more expert than the student. Learning how to shape a research question, or how to investigate deeply, takes time to develop.
4. Students own it. They can break it: If the teacher always steps in to help, the students don't own the project. They have to take risks and think laterally – leading to great learning for them and deep CPD for their facilitators.
5. It's inclusive. Genuinely: This isn't for gifted and talented students. It's for everyone. We're refashioning scholarship to work with teenagers in a completely sincere way, because the starting point is always their own expertise.

How the initiative includes student voice and/or student action:

Student voice is the foundation of the whole process, based on our core principle that students are the experts in their own lives. The Research Institute is an apprenticeship into scholarship, in which the students come to recognise their own position as experts and then extend their expertise to questions that matter to them. Without student voice and student action, there would be no Research Institute.

The RI demystifies 'research' and shows students that they are able to make a meaningful scholarly contribution in Middle School – a level of ambition that goes far beyond the normal expectations for children of their age. In line with our design principles, we do not 'teach' research but apprentice students into new ways of thinking. This approach is deeply embedded in our work: students start by exploring their own experiences and are doing thematic analysis before they realise it; they record their work as they go in video, photos and written reflections, so that the final word is always theirs. The questions that drive the project are not chosen in advance: our academic mentor facilitates a session in which the students narrow down their own ideas to find a final research focus, evaluating each idea to see find those that are both interesting and practicable.

Staff are partners to the RI project, not teachers. We engage the students in dialogue and try to ask challenging questions, but often have to adapt to shifts in direction when the students decide to pursue an idea.

Sharing beyond the school community:

"Working on the Research Institute is the best professional learning I've ever done." - RI facilitator, 2018-19

The Research Institute started as an enrichment project at the International School of London. As it has grown, we have worked with the students to distil five design principles. We have expanded to a second school in our group and one in Hong Kong, developing our understanding of the process as we work in different contexts. From this we have built a package of materials so that new schools can set up a Research Institute of their own. We are deepening our understanding of our work by engaging with research into how students learn at postgraduate level, using a framework for master's-level study to see how the Research Institute develops students' academic skills at a level far beyond their curriculum stage. Our academic mentor is leading a research project about the RI, working with staff and students as co-researchers to investigate the impact that the project has on our participants. Sharing the RI beyond our school means apprenticing more teachers and

researchers into our genuinely student-led approach. We have to unlearn our teacherly habits and find new ways of engaging with young people as coresearchers.

The RI constantly challenges us to be agile, to move from lesson planning to genuine dialogue, and to participate more-or-less equally with our learners. This shift in thinking affects everything else we do. It is infectious, stimulating and great fun.