



Up in the hills, far away

The publisher of a prominent Japanese newspaper is building a super-premium ‘European-style’ boarding school in Japan’s Chugoku mountain range. But considering the country’s aging population and the school’s eye-watering fees, is there room in the market for such an offering, asks **Simone Rensch**

Every year, hundreds of thousands of Asian parents enrol their children in boarding schools located overseas, lured by the open doors that an international education is said to push. Another reason they do so is because such schools on home turf are a scarce commodity. According to ISC Research, the intelligence unit of the UK’s International Schools Council, 710 of Asia’s 5,910 international schools offer a mix of boarding and day facilities, but there are just 105 boarding-only institutions.

Next year, there will be 106. Transplanting a European boarding experience into Asia to present the continent’s families with an option that’s closer to home, Minako Suematsu, publisher of *The Japan Times*, the country’s largest and oldest English-language newspaper, is launching Jinseki International School, which claims it will be the only school of its kind in Japan.

Nestled away in the Chugoku mountains, Jinseki International School, which is being touted as Japan’s first and only “European-style” boarding school, will be the first new primary school to open in Japan’s Hiroshima prefecture for several decades. There, students as young as six years old will inhabit small log cabins situated by tranquil waterfalls and rivers against alpine backdrops. Suematsu was inspired by her son’s boarding school in Switzerland – Institut Le Rosey, one of the world’s most expensive schools with annual tuition fees exceeding £85,000 – and began exploring a long-standing desire to enter her native education market in 2016. The nearly 800,000-square-metres of land in the





Jinseki International School boarding facilities

Jinseki Kogen district on which the school and its boarding cabins will sit are owned entirely by the Suematsu family. Indeed, the plot is grand. But Jinseki International School plans to accommodate just 20 students upon launching and will have a maximum capacity of only 144. Small class sizes across six year groups will comprise a mix of Japanese and international pupils. Institut Le Rosey not only inspired the school's picturesque surroundings, but also its fees of ¥6,000,000 (£41,282) a year. By comparison, studies at other international primary schools cost between ¥1.7 million and ¥2.6 million annually.

But Japan is facing demographic difficulties. By median age (46.9 years) it is the oldest large country in the world. Last year, its population declined by 449,000, as 1.37 million people died but only 910,000 babies were born. As a result, a number of Japanese schools have closed. Considering these challenges, along with Jinseki International School's eye-watering price point and nanosized student base, is there a place in the market for such an offering? And, if so, why hasn't an institution like it been established before?

While international schools in Japan – and across Asia – are aplenty, boarding schools are few and far between. According to Sam Fraser, head of Asia-Pacific research at ISC Research, there are just 20 schools in Japan with boarding facilities, of which only six are considered premium, as Jinseki International School will be. Michael Rob Gray, headmaster of Institut Le Rosey and an advisor to Suematsu, says a complete absence of boarding schools for primary school children presents an “educational opening” in itself. While he admits that Jinseki International School was designed with “money people” in mind, he highlights that many parents who send their children to the Institut Le Rosey – whose student base comprises 30% Asians – say that they chose the school because they were “looking for something different from the education [on offer in Asia]

– they want their children to develop personally”. There is “an obvious opening for [something similar] in Japan,” he says, adding that by catering solely to primary school children Jinseki International School will prepare children for the “next step in a boarding education”.

Cult-like clientele

Even with an eye-watering price tag attached to tuition at Jinseki International School, filling seats should not be a cause for concern, according to Kaushik Mohan, partner at L.E.K. Consulting. He tells this publication: “When the focus is on filling 150 seats, all you are looking for is a niche segment within a large market. In effect, when an addressable market is large and deep, you are looking for a small proportion of customers who really want the product.” The school has a “niche and unique” value proposition that will attract wealthy families looking for something different, he adds.

Mohan likens Jinseki International School's proposition to that of the Green School in Bali, Indonesia. The non-profit private school educates children to be “green leaders” through a “purpose-driven curriculum” within a wall-less natural environment, and has garnered a cult-like following thanks to its unique offering, despite a next-to-nothing marketing spend. “Roughly 60-70% of the children at this school belong to families where their parents relocated just so their kids could access the Green School experience,” says Mohan. “The ‘mountain school’ could have the potential to attract a similar segment.” Jinseki International School could also entice children of Chinese and South Korean families, who increasingly send their children to schools abroad due to regulatory restrictions around international education at home, explains Mohan. “One cohort where this might work with is South Korean students who go abroad for K12 education, even at primary grades,” he says. “Close proximity to Japan could also be an advantage.” ▶



Jinseki Kogen Hotel



John Bough, St Andrew's School in Kenya



Sam Fraser, ISC Research



Jinseki International School grounds



► As a market entrant, generating awareness among the right societal cohorts is likely the highest hurdle facing Jinseki International School, according to Mohan. Although what it plans to offer is a unique and “highly marketable asset... they need to get to a point where within the right circles, everyone is talking about this Hiroshima mountain school,” he says. “That really is what is going to drive it.

“Could this [Japanese] school find 150 children in the region? In a high-growth region like Asia, 150 sets of parents who can afford to spend on this value proposition exist. The question is how to identify and reach them in a cost-effective manner.”

Japan’s international schools are not accredited by government and children who attend don’t officially fulfil the nine years of compulsory education mandated by law. Though some Japanese children still attend them, international schools are largely perceived as educators of expatriate children. According to JLL, an investment manager and property specialist, very few international schools are approved by Japan’s Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), and most not recognised by local authorities and government. However, Jinseki International School will comply with curriculum guidelines set out by MEXT, fulfilling national compulsory education requirements while delivering the UK curriculum. Therefore, its offering will appeal to both Japanese natives and the expat community, the school’s advisors say, and accreditation can be leveraged as a unique selling point.

Instead of the “drill to kill” approach towards teaching – which many Asian education systems, notably China’s, have drawn stern criticism for peddling – Jinseki International School aims to develop children’s personality, creativity and originality, says John Bough, one of Suematsu’s advisors, who is an executive director of St Andrew’s School in Kenya and a former head of the Dragon School in Oxford, the UK. He explains that while the school will be “academically rigorous”, it will not be exam-driven and will seek to push boundaries outside of the traditional classroom. “It will be much more about focusing on social-emotional learning and children learning not just in the classrooms, but outside of



Minako Suematsu, Jinseki International School

them, too,” says Bough. “All classrooms have outdoor spaces built into the educational experience for the students.”

He agrees with Mohan in that building a strong reputation through word-of-mouth will be Jinseki International School’s biggest challenge. He says that the team is doing “everything” to get prospective parents to sign on the dotted line and said conversations with specialist student recruitment agencies had already commenced. Overall, he’s optimistic. Bough says parents who are already interested in sending their children to boarding schools in Switzerland, the UK or the US will be attracted to “an option closer” to home. Meanwhile, Japanese parents want their children to “grow up in an internationally-aware environment” and have the opportunity to study abroad when they are older, he says. “Parents also recognise it is quite lonely being a kid in the middle of the city in Japan. If you are a single child and have parents working two jobs, there are great advantages to having your child on what can be described as a ‘permanent summer camp’ with lessons thrown in.”

The time is now

It could be argued that now is as good a time as ever to enter the Japanese market. The country is keen to raise its international profile on a number of fronts. Educationally speaking, it is aiming to have at least 200 schools offering International Baccalaureate by next year (an optimistic target, albeit, given there are just 70 IB programmes currently on offer) and is looking to lift the number of foreign students at its higher education institutions. Moreover, next year’s Olympic Games in Tokyo will cast Japan into the media limelight, boost tourism and spur its economy.

Media mogul Suematsu is somewhat tight-lipped over the project, and opts to let her advisors do most of the talking and media handling. However, in a series of short email exchanges, she explains that the Jinseki International School project is one of passion and, therefore, will not pursue a profit.

“The option of entrusting [children] to professionals should be available to more people,” she writes. “My ambition is that both children and parents in Japan will come to see boarding schools as a new option and a genuine alternative.” ■



Michael Rob Gray, Institut Le Rosey