

---

# German Boarding Schools for International Students

Eva Marie Haberfellner, Ph.D., Ph.D.

---

*A privileged educational environment  
where lifelong friendships develop*

**G**ermany—the center of Europe is growing more and more international.

Whereas among the German population the public opinion regarding boarding schools is often very negative, German boarding schools, and almost exclusively private schools, often belong to the top schools in the country. Historically, most boarding schools in Germany developed later than in other European Countries, especially the UK. Many of the current schools were founded around the turn of the last century, or shortly after. Reviewing the last century in the history of the German educational system, one comes to the conclusion that many, if not the most important changes in the educational reforms began in the private boarding schools, i.e. coeducation, project work, the Student Council, the combination of academic and vocational education, bilingualism, student democracy, to mention just a few.

One of the central figures in German boarding school philosophy was Kurt Hahn who founded Schule Schloss Salem on the northern arm of Lake Constance in 1920, Schule Birklehof in the Black Forest in 1932, Gordonstoun School in Scotland in 1934 and the Atlantic College in Wales in 1962. He also introduced the Outward Bound concept and the Duke of Edinburgh Award; he founded the United World Colleges and was also the nestor of the International Baccalaureate.

His revolutionary idea was to follow a holistic approach in education. He always tried to view the individual personality as a whole and bring out its qualities to their best. His pedagogic goals are reflected in the so-called “Seven Laws of Salem,”<sup>[1]</sup> which even today often serve as the underlying rules of education for many educationally reformed boarding schools worldwide. His aim of education was to “insure the survival of these qualities, i.e. an enterprising curiosity, an undefeatable spirit, tenacity, pursuit and readiness for sensible self-

denial, and above all, compassion.”

Experiential learning takes place daily and in various different forms. The German boarding schools in the tradition of Kurt Hahn offer many extracurricular activities, similar to Outward Bound, such as, for instance, sailing, rock climbing, skiing and snowboarding, kayaking, canoeing and so on. These activities help young people to build their sense of self-worth, find out where their limits are, learn to take on challenges and work together with others. Since the country setting itself hardly offers any alternatives, young people have to learn to participate in a clearly defined school community. Their public presence is tested daily and the amount of feedback they receive is immense. Experiencing the daily chores and routines, the other young people, the adults, the school's traditions – in essence the community they have joined – shapes the students during one of the most important phases in their development.

Besides his outspoken ideas on education, as recorded in the “Seven Laws of Salem,” Kurt Hahn always aimed at internationality. Influenced by the impressions of World War One and suffering from exile himself during the Nazi regime, he strongly believed that the following generations need to grow up in an in-

---

EVA MARIE HABERFELLNER



Principal  
Schule Schloss Salem  
Salem, Germany

ternational context, in order to get a feeling for different social and cultural backgrounds. He was convinced that only an education in an international community could prevent the world from heading for a future disaster similar to those that he had experienced himself in the two World Wars.

With the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall 20 years ago, Germany has become the geographical center of Europe. High democratic standards as well as a functioning legal and executive system guarantee personal freedom for any individual, regardless of his sex, regional provenance and religious faith, and also a comparatively safe environment for potential investors from all over the world. All these factors have contributed towards the fact that Germany is now a major economic player and a political force both in Europe and worldwide. Even in the present economic crisis there are many voices claiming that Germany will play an important role in overcoming the financial crisis due to its filed craftsmanship, its technical innovations and its economic power.

The German educational system, especially the so-called "Abitur" (the final school-leaving examination in Germany qualifying for entrance at a university), is still highly valued worldwide, but particularly on the Asian continent. Many Chinese, Korean or Indian families with an entrepreneurial background consider an education for their children at a German boarding school. This promises an upbringing in a German-speaking surrounding and familiarity with the European culture and democratic traditions—core requirements for a successful integration in the European market.

At the same time, German boarding schools have felt an increasing demand for international education inside Germany itself. As a reaction to this, the International Baccalaureate was introduced a couple of years ago at some of the boarding schools as an alternative school-leaving examination qualifying for university entrance. Owing to its demanding academic standards, the "IB Diploma" is highly respected at English and American universities. German universities and those elsewhere in Europe also accept the examination as a qualification for university entrance. Thus, with the IB as an academic basis, students from German boarding schools are well prepared for the demands of the rapidly evolving business environments.

In recent years some of the German boarding schools extended their international and bilingual programs by early introduction of English as the main language of instruction in the Middle School. Students with a sparse knowledge of German can choose the international alternative and study for the International Baccalaureate in English. Since a large number of schools, especially the boarding schools in the countryside, offer a stimulating environment which is highly conducive to learning a foreign language, the foreign students learn German rapidly throughout their boarding-school activities. The possibility of learning German is supported by private instruction, either at specialized language schools or during separate lessons parallel to their schooling, which also include an in-depth knowledge of the terminology relating to each of the subjects.

Due to all these changes, German boarding schools have become very attractive both for German and international students. For the former, they offer the opportunity to live in an often rural location yet with an very international environment, and to engage in many activities that are not usually offered at state schools, e.g. manual and artistic work, playing classical or modern music, acting in plays, taking part in excursions, in "outward bound" expeditions or certain sports or meeting outstanding people who visit the school to give lectures or recitals. Corresponding to their respective ages they learn to take responsibility for the wellbeing of the community in which they live. They have to develop social and political virtues and skills in order to balance their own interests with the interests of others.

For the international students, education at a German boarding school additionally offers the chance to grow up within the European culture and democratic tradition, and also to gain an intimate knowledge of a major economic player. The German political system offers security and well-being—a fact that is valued highly especially by parents from less safe parts of the world.

All in all German boarding schools offer a privileged educational environment where lifelong friendships develop.



---

1. The Seven Laws of Salem, Hahn, K.: Salem. (1930), p. 1-3.