
SCHOLA LIBERUM

a free school for the third millennium



Project Proposal

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draft proposal for comment and conversation

OPPORTUNITY

Schola Liberum: a new model of free school, for this third millennium

"Much of the problem-solving work carried out in the world today is performed by teams in an increasingly global and computerised economy. <- -> Moreover, with greater availability of networked computers, individuals are increasingly expected to work with diverse teams spread across different locations using collaborative technology"

PISA 2015: collaborative problem solving framework

"Just imagine it - within walking distance of your front door. A small school - where the teacher knows every child's name..."

Michael Gove, 2010

"I really believe that individuals have a lot more sense than people give them credit for. Parents know what is best for their children, so if they are unhappy with what is on offer, why shouldn't they be free to set up alternatives?"

Rachel Wolf 2009

"If western civilisation is in a state of permanent crisis, it is not far-fetched to suggest that there may be something wrong with its education. No civilisation, I am sure, has ever devoted more energy and resources to organised education."

E. F. Schumacher

"In terms of the overall quality of education, inspections show that pupils in small schools are not disadvantaged in comparison with those in larger schools because of the size of school. Small schools are equally capable of providing an effective education and many are among the most effective in the country."

OFSTED 2000

Raison d'être

A perfect storm of opportunity makes this possible, affordable, desirable and achievable, today:

- considerable growth in the technology of, and potential for, on-line tutoring, adaptive and tech-rich learning
- a real concern that "there are many more children hidden away from the view of the authorities, off-rolled or in unregistered schools across the country than previously thought"¹
- some localised but significant school place shortages
- a global move towards valuing project based learning and collaborative problem solving at a distance²

¹ Letter of advice from Sir Michael Wilshaw to Secretary of State for Education, 16th May 2016 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/523694/Unregistered_schools_advice_note_16_May_2016.pdf

² <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisaproducts/Draft%20PISA%202015%20Collaborative%20Problem%20Solving%20Framework%20.pdf>

- an economic skills need for connected, collaborative, problem solving, global, and project based teamwork
- a commercial pressure to create on-line academies and other learning institutions that needs a UK based, controlled, trusted pilot to evolve governance, protocols and processes
- a dissatisfaction, for some, in the breadth of existing school choices available - perhaps signalled by a significant (60% over 3 years) growth in home education³
- a concern about teacher shortage - particularly in some important subjects, alongside a growing pool of ex and retired teachers, still fond of their subject and age specialisms

This “perfect storm” of opportunity coincides with the group proposing the “Schola Liberum” free school coming together with a uniquely long and trusted track record in all the key cornerstone areas it embraces, and with a proven history of taking important learning projects to scale; these are safe hands and the timing is right to allow them to collaborate.

Lead Responsible Adults (LRAs), and others

From a participating parent we would seek a commitment to train and attend on a tightly timetabled regular basis as the Lead Responsible Adult (LRAs, these are not teachers) and there would also be a rota of committed “helpers”. We anticipate that grandparents might be a substantial party of this helper team. Everyone involved would need ICPC/DBS clearance of course. Many parents will also host Learning Clusters (see below). Typically commitment would be one full day a fortnight, or a half day a week, plus training and development evening sessions. We believe that for most this can be congruent with their employment. Learning Cluster children will have a regular schedule of hosted spaces, supplemented with work elsewhere, for example in museums, libraries, local businesses, and Base Camps.

Mapping the timetable, personalised learning plans, LRAs, helpers, a full curriculum, personal tutor support, on-line experts, visits, projects, peer support and opportunities onto daily schedule of Learning Clusters is complex but is a technology challenge. It is complex, but possible. Effectively we will provide a turnkey solution for any new Learning Cluster with a manual of operation and a set of protocols.

Central core team

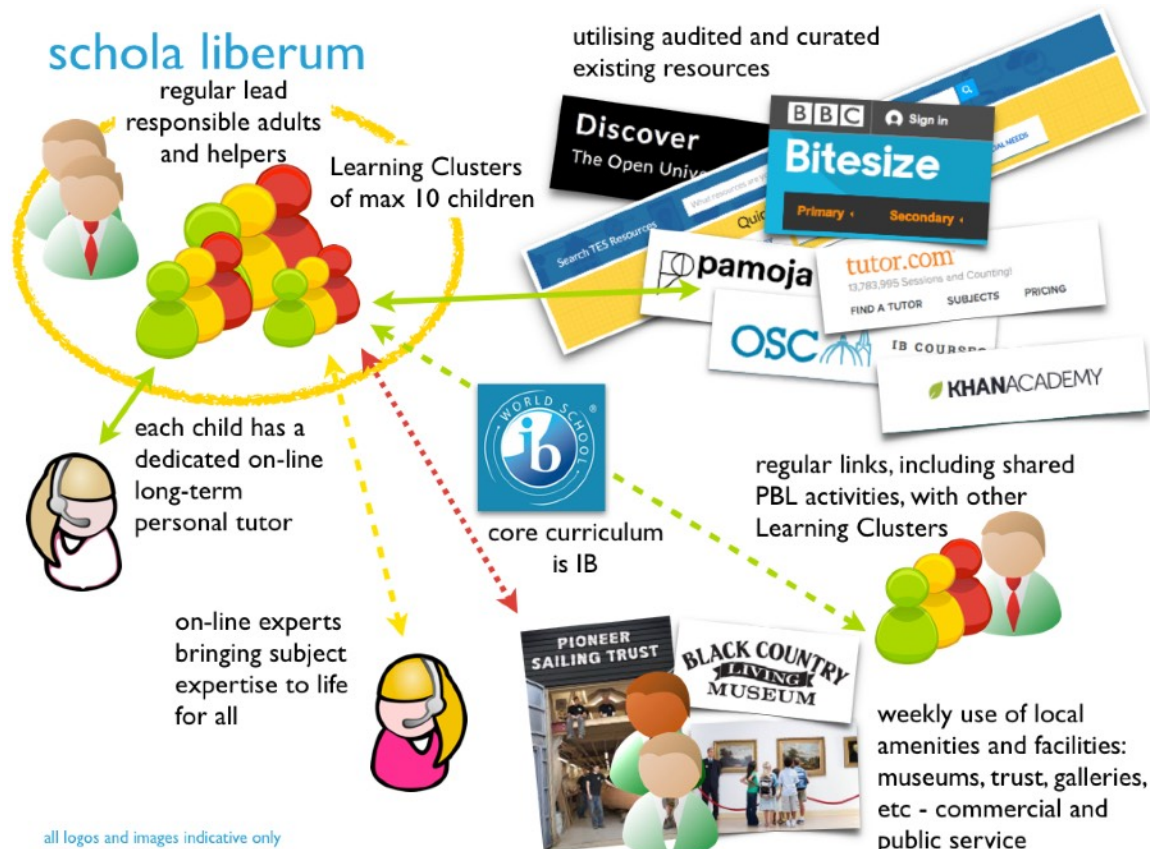
At Schola Liberum’s centre a small core team will manage the detail, data, statutory requirements and scale planning of all this and will also be part of a constant regime of quality assurance, observation, progress and advice. Initially our core team will be centrally involved in the set-up and evolution of our two pilot Learning Clusters. The overall institution will thus have a nominal “headteacher”, a content and pathways manager, a CTO, and governance through a conventional representative governing body. Obviously with scale this core team will grow slightly but the marginal cost of roll-out will fall very quickly.

Learning Clusters

Alongside the manual of operation and protocols (see above) we will be prescriptive about some of the details and minimum requirements for each Learning Cluster. Those prescriptions will include ambient details (light

³ the number of primary-age children recorded as home educated rose by 60% in the three academic years to 2014-15. In the secondary phase, the increase was 37%.

levels, ventilation...), furniture configurations (we do not want to create miniature 1970 classrooms in people's front rooms!) and technology (in terms of access, bandwidth, shared screen opportunities and more). These might require small, simple but very affordable changes to space. Again, a manual of preparation will be available to Learning Cluster hosts. All LCs will operate on a Use My Own Devices (UMODs) basis.



Summary

A technology rich part-virtual free school, fully within the relevant inspection framework - but without a substantial capital investment, using local premises in homes, vacant retail space and local facilities, with multiple and connected, tiny but supported, communities of mixed age learners (Learning Clusters), following the International Baccalaureate curriculum, using on-line tutorial resources, but with personalised tutoring support, harnessing adaptive learning where appropriate, often supported by retired / exited teachers and other subject professionals (including in-work specialists).

The local premises would be supplemented by the use of existing public sector and other facilities: museums, parks, employment internships, botanic gardens and more. Over time the growth of a series of Base Camps (the concept of Field Centres would be indicative) would allow immersive learning (including overnighting) in alternative contexts, offering a broader socialisation experience.

This is not a subset of what a school should be but a superset that equips its students to be effective, connected, qualified, employees, parents, citizens & entrepreneurs in this new millennium, offering more, not less, but differently. It is one part of the mix of future education.

12 project cornerstones

1. **Very local learning clusters.** Around 10 children, one responsible adult⁴ at any time plus their nominated “helper”. Very local, indoor, outdoor, in other premises (museums, libraries, parks...), workplaced, agile.
2. **All adults involved are DBS or ICPC cleared,** including participating parents.
3. **Funding is built around the AWPU** with supplementary factors where appropriate and available. This would include Pupil Premium and post 16 funding. Although Capital requirements are minimal, there are other new costs associated with a substantially on-line component and other costs (for example teachers’ pension contribution) will be different, and will need to be modelled and explored. In essence, this should not cost more than conventional state education but should cost less.
4. **Students know each other very well** - very much a learning “family”. Each child has a dedicated on-line tutor who is personal & long term too.
5. **Learning is personalised,** stage not age, ambitious and prioritised.
6. **Learning is grounded** - a substantial focus on applied learning meeting locally defined needs whilst giving curriculum relevance at all times. Substantial amounts of learning will be in the community, through internships and workplace experiences, in local organisations and facilities. There is an expectation that children will spend 40% (around two days per week) of their time applying learning in external activities; that would included playful learning especially for the younger age children.
7. **Mixed age** and **Stage not Age.** Clear research favours both. With tiny numbers in each Learning Clusters these are natural organisational principles anyway. The age range is 2 - 18, although 0 - 18 or indeed to 21 (graduate) may be possible in later stages. In the first instance, cohorts in Schola Liberum’s Learning Clusters will be targeted at 4 - 14, although older siblings would not necessarily be rejected. Those initial cohorts would then grow through to our ceiling age.
8. **Transparency.** Placing particular emphasis on celebration and exhibition the work milestones of children progressing through Schola Liberum will be exhibited and evident at all times. This applies between Learning Clusters as well as within. Communities will see and know what learning is occurring.
9. **A designedly global focus** (very much in line with Pisa 2018) with a clear intention to provide our children with the remote working and trans-cultural team based capabilities needed for active participation in employment, citizenship and community going forward into this century. We anticipate Learning Clusters in multiple countries as we progress.
10. Schola Liberum will use **existing resources.** There is no intention here to become a bespoke publishing house. Our conviction, and considerable experience, is that there are very many on-line resources: free, charitably provided, or commercial. Any and all of these can provide significant personalised pathways but need careful curation and auditing for relevance. Additionally, adaptive testing and other personalised resources should, and can, play a part. This field is changing rapidly at present.
11. This model is different, but it is **not a subset of existing school opportunities.** It is a different set and we think that for some it is a better set.
12. **Cost per student is no greater** than for traditional state school and could well prove to be cheaper in that there is no major capital requirement at all.

⁴ ICPC / DBS cleared

The core development team:

Our core development team, have outstanding reputations and experience - for example, more than a decade of a successful DfE supported virtual school for some 1,000 children annually. The core team are identified, willing, able and standing by.

Indicative timelines

There are two planning cycles, effectively:

The **first cycle** is intensive and takes two Learning Clusters through the first two years of an evolving Schola Liberum.

Then, having clarified and controlled the per capita marginal cost of growth, the **second “roll out” cycle** seeks substantial scale, including global growth.

The first children on-roll could begin their learning in September 2017, the project would move to substantial scale from September 2018.

Because the free school is distributed, virtual and does not need capital funding for building or conversion work, these timescales could shorten with higher levels of initial support.

Planning and consultation phase - is where we currently are. Alongside the experience of the core development team, a broad range of inputs has been sought, ranging from James Penny (formerly ICT lead for the Harris Group of Academies and then Solutions Director at academy ICT infrastructure provider European Electronique (James has considerable experience of bespoke independent and online schooling), to Phil Brown (Executive Officer and Lead for the Australia’s Country Education Project supporting the provision of education within rural and remote communities for over 35 years).

This planning and consultation phase phase closes at the beginning of the Autumn Term - September 2016

12 month detailed design phase - covers the next full academic (Northern Hemisphere) year 2016/17.

This detailed design phase would:

- lay down an instruction manual;
- specify necessary details for FF&E;
- identify and contract subject specialists and evangelists;
- build the complex distributed model of governance and organisation;
- properly model the organisational finances, central and local;
- gauge further international interest; map and narrate an anticipated curriculum;
- develop several indicative “day in the life” scenarios;
- continue a parental dialogue through individual conversation, focus groups and existing communities;
- continue a student dialogue through individual conversation, focus groups and existing communities;
- develop a Q&A database of answers (and questions) for interested parents, students and others.

Obviously, we are seeking support for this 12 month detailed design phase.

Identification of four Learning Clusters with personal tutors, responsible adults, locations, etc. This phase will occur in parallel to the detailed design phase, starting September 2016 also. The first two pilot clusters, one coastal community and one inner London (for both contrast and to meet needs) would be joined within the year by two further clusters. The initial register of, and training support for, on-line professionals (subject specialists, personal tutors, etc) also occurs as a pilot activity within this year.

Curation and auditing of resources for relevance will be an on-going task throughout the life of Schola Liberum. There is such a wide choice of materials available that the job of curating and auditing resources and, where necessary, mapping a value for money judgement against outcomes, will be ongoing throughout the life of Schola Liberum. Within the team we have very high levels of experience of making, judging, using and versioning resources. Allowing the extended membership of Schola Liberum to play a part, students included, will need protocols and development support.

Again we are seeking support for this important phase as we set up.

Technology infrastructure. As mentioned above, we will provide a turnkey solution for each new Learning Cluster, with a manual of operation and a set of protocols. That is a complex but very achievable technology task, particularly because we will design at the outset for substantial scale.

We are seeking support for this important phase as we set up.

Evidence and experience base

Of course, nobody has done this before. But Schola Liberum builds on extensive experience and relevant research. Many of the ingredients have been successfully implemented before, but the recipe is fresh.

Perhaps we should start with small scale. Research indicates that there may be many benefits from smaller learning communities (Supovitz & Christman, 2005; Howley, et al., 2000). Their most important identified benefits include:

raised student achievement; increased attendance; elevated teacher satisfaction; and improved “school climate”

Small schools may also be especially important for disadvantaged or disaffected students by offering more individualised attention and with teacher agility offering a variety of approaches. Also, smaller schools may promote substantially improved achievement and higher graduation rates (Howley, et al., 2000).

Another report (Lawrence 2002) suggests that small schools can be more cost effective than large schools

A more recent review of research studies found that small schools lead to better education outcomes than large schools [Leithwood & Jantzi 2009]

In terms of our own direct experiences, more than ten years of setting up, and then chairing, the DfES funded Notschool project for children who were excluded from school by circumstances or behaviour, drew attention to these significant and documented learning gains:

improved levels of literacy; improved social skills; improved self confidence; improved self esteem; above average development of ICT skills; collaborative working; exceptional technical skills and a better fit to accreditation.

Obviously the Notschool children were complex and difficult individuals. Nevertheless, the external evaluation report for the DfES in 2005 commented:

"Notschool.net cultivates communication leading to collaborative working skills within a virtual community. This is increasingly a 21st Century work environment."

"Of the 2004 – 2005 cohort of Notschool.net researchers 50% moved into further education, 26% entered college related employment and 18% entered full time work"

"Many of those Notschool.net researchers who entered the project showing little evidence of literacy, have demonstrated substantial gains through increased self-confidence in expression, spelling and keyboard skills."

There is much literature on small scale education. For example the top seven beneficial factors rated by Principals of small rural schools⁵ were:

- high expectations for all students;

⁵ Journal of Research in Rural Education, 2007, 22(1) "Rural school success: What can we learn?"

- Structural supports for learning;
- use of student data;
- alignment of curriculum, instruction and assessment;
- individualisation of instruction;
- teacher retention;
- professional development.

With conclusions pointing to the impact of the community-school relationship in providing support for the high academic expectations found in each of the case studies examined.

Similarly the Rural School and Community Trust paper “The Hobbit effect: Why Small Works in Public Schools⁶ identified these reasons “why small works”:

Ten Research-based Reasons Why Small Works

1. There is greater participation in extra-curricular activities, and that is linked to academic success.
2. Small schools are safer.
3. Kids feel they belong.
4. Small class size allows more individualized instruction.
5. Good teaching methods are easier to implement.
6. Teachers feel better about their work.
7. Mixed-ability classes avoid condemning some students to low expectations.
8. Multiage classes promote personalized learning and encourage positive social interactions.
9. Smaller districts mean less bureaucracy.
10. More grades in one school alleviate many problems of transitions to new schools.

which is very much in line with our thinking too with its espousal of mixed age, stage not age, agile learning making up what is evidently an effective model of education (twenty-one of the top 100 chief executives in Australia attended small rural schools for example although those schools account for less than 8% of national school roll).

Where much debate in the last century - and policy decisions - circled around the cost of tiny learning communities, a step change in this century has been both the affordability of communications **between** small learning groups, alongside a compelling and widely articulated economic case to develop the “21st century skills” of collaborative endeavour, project approaches, communication and peer support. Economies of scale of operation no longer equate to economies of scale of shared location.

⁶ Lorna Jimerson August 2006

The core team's track record with on-line learning goes back to the 1980s with teletext and electronic mail based learning communities, including fully on-line degree courses. Since then, major on-line projects have included the (then) Guinness world record largest internet learning project in the world with the Tesco funded Tesco SchoolNet 2000 (TSN2K), placing every headteacher in the UK into a 21,000 strong community of practice Talking Heads, the Orange and QCA sponsored eVIVA⁷ innovative "blue skies" pilot project using mobile phones, voice recognition technology and the Internet to support formative and summative assessment across 7 schools for three years, and much more.

Each of these and other ambitious projects yielded a lot of understanding and many salient pieces of advice, from the central role and nature of facilitation, through the evolution of face to face relationships whose genesis was virtual, to the nature of questions and conversation starters in on-line project communities. We have also learned successfully how to take these projects to a very substantial scale, safely but quite rapidly.

This accumulated detail and experience allows us to quick-start the Schola Liberum project, safely and to move rapidly to scale.

⁷ <http://rubble.heppell.net/archive/eviva/default.html> qualifications and curriculum authority QCA "The eVIVA project"

Terror and bombing attacks on schools: a Plan B

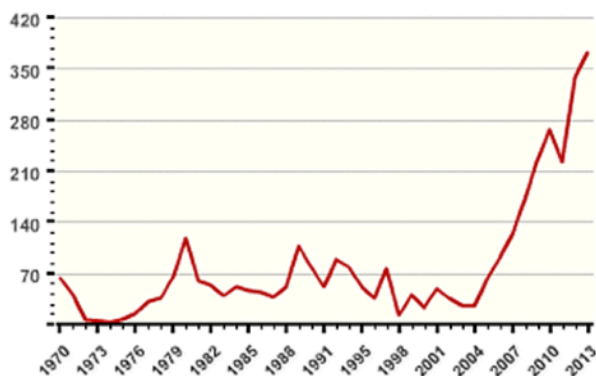
Initially, the section below was redacted from our public facing documents - we didn't want to encourage a worsening of what is reported below. But our proposal was put in June 2016 and we are still waiting for any progress. As we wait, the danger has grown:

In the words of the December 2017 UNICEF press release, children have become frontline targets in conflicts around the world. Manuel Fontaine, UNICEF Director of Emergency Programmes, comments that "As these attacks continue year after year, we cannot become numb. Such brutality cannot be the new normal".

We think Schola Liberum has a significant role to play both in child safety in dangerous regions and in providing a rapidly scaleable Plan B in regions seeing dangers increasing. Therefore, we are opening this section to public gaze - it was written in June 2016:

Put simply, the incidence of attacks on schools has increased very sharply since 2004.

Researchers at the University of Maryland recorded attacks on education between 1970 and 2013. The Y axis on this graph shows incidents, the X axis shows years. You will note the step change.



The last 12 months in particular - throughout 2015 - have seen a series of extremely bloody attacks on schools, colleges and universities. Clearly for some, hurting a culture or a community now embraces hurting its children and schools. This extends well beyond war zones.

There is a possibility that this will become a European problem. Arguably, a number somewhere around 2 or 3 bombed schools in any one country would be enough to stop many parents releasing their children to school for what may be a substantial period of time. Currently there is no Plan B for allowing education to continue in such appalling circumstances - the economic and cultural cost would be incalculable, but presumably that is the intention for whatever reason. There are multiple dangers to children's progress and education, let alone their safety; Boko Haram (the popular short name for Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad in Nigeria) roughly translates as: "Western education is a sin". That won't be circumvented by just building more "western" schools.

One contribution from Schola Liberum would be to share a set of protocols and structures thus allowing an alternative, hopefully temporary, but supported home based learning to step into the gap in the short term. A kind of pedagogic Civil Defence!

In conclusion

This is an experienced team, with an outstanding track record; we are offering this draft proposal for comment and conversation.

For Schola Liberum, need, accommodation, connectivity and resources are all out there.

Perhaps it is enough to observe, as so many have lately, that the world's largest taxi company, Über, owns no taxis, the world's largest provider of short term accommodation, Airbnb, owns no buildings, huge retailers Amazon and Alibaba carry no stock and have no outlet premises, whilst the one of largest 'phone conversation providers, Skype, has no telecoms infrastructure. In that context, a school without its own premises should not seem so surprising (although we would commit to doing rather better on the governance, accountability and ethics!).

Schola Liberum seeks to build affordable, effective, scaleable, global and exceptional learning opportunities from pre-existing resources, with new technologies and from proven experience.

GLOSSARY

this section still to be completed - a task for the 12 month detailed design phase.

our shared experience as a team is that agreement on terminology goes a very long way towards building a cohesive project. Our terminology would include definitions, and perhaps better terms, for:

learning clusters

base camps

on-line learning

on-line tutorial support

International Baccalaureate (IB)

lead responsible adults

responsible adults

assisting adults

stage not age

mixed age

peer support

longitude based collaboration

latitude based collaboration

...and more

READINGS

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