

Perceptions of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme among Australian and New Zealand Universities

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Executive Summary



Context and Objectives

The number of secondary students completing an International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma has risen rapidly in recent years, and the IB is playing an increasing role in preparing people for university study. The International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) is interested in universities' perceptions of the IB as a preparation for undergraduate study, and engaged the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) to research this area of higher education.

The aim of the study was to investigate university representatives' perceptions of the IB Diploma. A key aspect of the research was to determine what university representatives knew about the IB Diploma, and whether they felt it provides a suitable preparation for university study. A further aspect was to examine the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the programme, both on its own and in comparison with alternative qualifications, so as to determine how the IB Diploma might be enhanced to better prepare students for university study. It is hoped that the results of the research will help enhance the value of the IB to universities, schools, and students.

This study must be framed within the wide-ranging work done by the IBO to integrate IB graduates and the IB Diploma into university education. Among other activities, the IBO encourages universities to develop a Recognition Policy, offers universities secure access to the IBO website, and works with tertiary admissions centers and directly with universities. The secure website contains: IB curriculum guides, past IB examinations, and mark schemes, IB exam results for individual candidates or groups of candidates, and an IB recognition policy. The current analysis should be read with this context in mind.

The study commenced in September 2006 and ran until early 2007. In late 2006 a survey was conducted of 644 senior academic and administrative university staff at 47 Australian and New Zealand universities, with 159 usable responses received. Individual interviews were conducted with 11 of the survey respondents in order to capture more detailed information about the perceptions of university representatives. This report presents a consolidated analysis of the survey and interview results, and makes several suggestions on further developments which might be considered by the IBO.

Experience with IB Students

In total, 56% of the surveyed university representatives indicated that they had some administrative or academic involvement with an IB Diploma student in the last five years. Contact was most likely among representatives working in an administrative role. Overall, university representatives reported that IB Diploma students were more likely to study in the humanities or sciences, or in commerce, health or law. These patterns were confirmed by the interviews, which also suggested that most institutions do not systematically collect information about the performance of entering students, IB Diploma students included.

There was good reception during the interviews to the idea that university staff might become further involved in aspects of the IB Diploma. To this end, the IBO might consider developing strategies for engaging a wider range of university staff in the IB Diploma. Discussions with the university representatives suggested that a multifaceted approach would provide the best means of helping university staff learn about the IB Diploma and IB graduates.

Views on the IB diploma

The survey invited respondents to rate the level of importance of seven aspects of the IB Diploma in helping to make it a successful programme. The most responses, and the highest levels of agreement, were associated with broad statements about the IB Diploma which covered matters such as the use of a range of assessment strategies, the breadth and depth of the curriculum, and having students study at least three subjects in depth. Respondents were most uncertain about the three compulsory elements of the IB Diploma: the extended essay, the study of theory of knowledge, and creativity, action, service (the creative, physical, and community services component).

Several themes emerged from analysis of the open-ended survey responses. Most comments were supportive of the IB Diploma, often highly so. Among these were broad suggestions that the IB had no specific weaknesses and that the programme is valuable. More specifically, many respondents commented that it enhanced university students' academic competence and capability, that the programme gave them experience of greater breadth and depth, that it provided an internationalized educational experience with a greater emphasis on community engagement, and that it should be more widely adopted.

The comments also exposed a lack of awareness of the IB Diploma. Many commented that they had no information on which to base their response nor to evaluate the relative performance of IB students or the programme. A similar set of responses noted

that as students generally self-select into the IB programme, it may be difficult to separate the relative success of the students from the programme.

A small number of responses were more critical of the programme, indicating that the IB provided no specific advantage over alternative preparations for university study, or that it was elitist. Individual respondents reported that IB students can experience adjustment problems, or that there are problems with the delivery of the programme at schools, the focusing and scoping of the programme, or the scoring and conversion of IB scores.

Comparing the IB diploma

The survey invited respondents to compare the IB Diploma with other forms of preparation for university study. In general, both the survey and interview results suggested that the IB Diploma was viewed as providing a university preparation that is as good as, and in nearly all instances better than that of the state certificates or other international certificates. Despite such views, university staff also reported a general view that state certificates should be supported, and that promotion of the IB Diploma might diminish support for a pathway that they should be working to enhance.

Importantly, all respondents who reported having enough information on which to base a response indicated that they were satisfied that the IB Diploma prepared students well for undergraduate study. Respondents were asked to indicate how well, compared with other qualifications, they felt that the IB Diploma prepares students for success in a number of areas of higher education. These aspects included first year study, academic learning, university life, course completion, graduate employment, and postgraduate study. The IB Diploma was seen to provide an effective preparation in each of these areas, and particularly for first-year study, academic learning and university life.

In all, the survey and interview results suggest that senior university representatives have a very high level of regard for the IB Diploma. While representatives' direct experience with IB Diploma graduates appears to be limited, it is clear that they see value in the programme, both in itself and in comparison with other possible preparations for university study. There remain several ways, however, in which the IBO should work to further enhance university representatives' knowledge of and engagement with the IB Diploma.

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