



LOOKING UP AND STANDING OUT

The Diploma Programme helps both Tonbridge Grammar School and its students to grow and be the best they can be.

A predominately female environment presents special challenges for a school. Realizing that many girls lack self-confidence, Tonbridge Grammar School (TGS) decided to provide the Diploma Programme (DP), appreciating its focus on the whole student. "We find that the Diploma gives a way to get students to be the very best they can be by meeting the challenges the DP sets them," says Pauline Bullen, deputy head teacher of the school in Tonbridge, Kent, United Kingdom. "It's a 'high aspirational' programme. It sets you up for success at university and life afterward." Alumni know that they are capable people who have completed an academically challenging programme, Bullen explains.

In addition to developing academic knowledge, the DP develops skills and emotional intelligence, she says. "It's not a qualification but a programme with a philosophy."

However, making the switch from offering A levels and the DP to only the DP was not simple. The school had to overcome a lack of awareness of the International Baccalaureate, work with parents who wanted to stay with the familiar national system and address the perception that the DP is more difficult than the A levels. There were only 30 to 40 students in the first DP classes when most students continued to choose A level.

Both then and now, TGS has wielded the weapon of data to battle for the DP. While offering both A levels and the DP, the school tracked its students' university acceptance. Those who missed their grades in A levels were not accepted as frequently as DP students who were off by a point or two, Bullen says. In fact, now that only the DP is offered, she says, the vast majority of TGS students get into their first-choice university.

Being an IB World School provides a distinct identity in an area of many excellent A-level schools, Bullen says, and helps to attract students. The school now has some 300 in the DP. TGS highlights the programme's "richer curriculum experience" at parents' evenings and in school marketing. Parents and students hear about the very strong emphasis on developing as a person and giving service to the local community and beyond, the focus on research on an area of interest to the student

**Tonbridge Grammar
School (state): years
7-13**

**First offered the Diploma
Programme:**
2004

Total number of students:
1,078

Deputy head teacher:
Pauline Bullen

Head of School:
Rosemary Joyce

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— PAULINE BULLEN, DEPUTY
HEAD TEACHER, TONBRIDGE
GRAMMAR SCHOOL, AND
CHAIR OF IBSCA (IB SCHOOLS &
COLLEGES ASSOCIATION)

and the relationship with a mentor that is inherent in doing the extended essay, which is similar to the undergraduate approach to academic work. “Those elements help students to mature,” Bullen says.

Also making the programme distinctive, Bullen says, are a number of other elements. She points to the balance created by having students take three Higher Level subjects (providing depth of study) and three at Standard Level (providing breadth of study); engaging course content with “world” reading lists and relevance; preparation for all careers and employment; coherence of the programme and its focus on process; development of Learner Profile attributes; and the coherence of the core and Theory of Knowledge course, which she notes develops higher-order thinking.

Parents, of course, have questions. “Most of the questions about the DP come from the local-national context of specialization early and being able to make very specific choices,” Bullen says. Given that many UK students expect to narrow down their course choice at ages 14 and 16, she adds, there is “cultural doubt and hesitancy in understanding that you can still have quality depth and have breadth.” The school aims to persuade parents to focus on the quality of the learning process that comes with the DP.

Echoing their parents, prospective students often express concerns about being obliged to choose across the DP’s six subject groups. “We have to explain that there’s a lot of flexibility,” Bullen says. Another powerful argument is how well the DP prepares students for university. “We have numerous university teachers who speak highly of what DP students can do and the skills they come with.” Completing the Diploma is a huge advantage, the school says. DP students are prepared for independent study and know how to conduct academic research and referencing, Bullen says, which is important not just at universities but for employers.

Fortunately, the teachers at TGS all believe in the DP. In the beginning, Bullen says, “Most of our teachers who might have been in the doubters camp became convinced. They see the freedom of choices, they value the approach, and they can see the quality of learning.” Good communication and strong leadership helped, too, she says. Now the school actively recruits teachers who know the IB or support the way it works. “Sometimes we have to reassure them that they too can become a great DP teacher,” Bullen says, and they often find they prefer to teach the DP rather than A levels.

Simply put, “the DP is the best and most coherent of post-16 academic pathways,” Bullen says, with its linkage that connects the six subject groups, TOK and the core. “It all adds up.”

Students at Tonbridge Grammar School can choose among six languages to study: French, Latin, Italian, Japanese, Mandarin and Spanish. Many schools don’t offer such a choice, but TGS does so for several reasons.

“You can’t be an IB World School and not believe in languages,” says deputy head teacher Pauline Bullen. “We’ve always had lots of strength in language.” Studying languages raises students’ confidence, she says. And with a large number of students coming to TGS at age 16, it makes sense to appeal to them with a variety of options.

“I am so utterly convinced one of the best things you can do is learn another language,” she says.

