

# Evaluation of IB Career-related Programme implementation in the county of Kent, UK

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## Purpose

In 2012, the International Baccalaureate (IB) launched a four-year pilot initiative with Kent County Council in the United Kingdom (UK) to offer students from more disadvantaged areas the opportunity to participate in a programme to prepare them for higher education and/or careers. This study, which was conducted in 2020 and 2021, examines the implementation of the IB Career-related Programme (CP) in Kent. Specifically, the study used qualitative and quantitative data from students, school leaders, teachers, coordinators and other key stakeholders to evaluate their experiences with the CP and to explore the successes and challenges of implementing the CP in Kent.

The CP model comprises three key components: the CP core, in which students develop a range of skills, including personal and professional skills, service learning, the reflective project, and language development; career-related studies<sup>1</sup>; and IB Diploma Programme (DP) courses (IBO, 2014; IBO, 2015).



Figure 1. CP model (IBO, 2015)

<sup>1</sup>In the UK context, this consists of applied general qualifications, such as the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC).

## Research design

Researchers conducted interviews with students and school staff, as well as representatives from the local authority, Kent County Council, employers of CP alumni, and admission officers from local institutions. The interview data were complemented by staff and student survey data that covered a broad range of questions related to implementation and experiences of the CP. The research team administered an online survey to staff and students from schools in Kent that offer the CP. In total, the interview and survey data involved 302 participants (67 interview participants, and 78 staff and 157 student survey respondents) from 31 schools. Additionally, researchers used school register data from 379 CP students in Kent to analyse student outcomes.

## Findings

### Student experiences with the CP

#### Reasons for CP participation

When considering the CP, students found the nature and structure of the programme to be appealing and believed it would be helpful in preparing them for university. Students also talked about the CP in comparison with other qualifications, such as GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education) or A levels, and felt that the CP would provide a more beneficial and enriching experience that would equip them for future academic and career pathways. Specifically, students were interested in the global and applied nature of the programme for work and further study.

Students viewed the CP as a gateway for discovering career pathways, but also for strengthening current interests. Moreover, students emphasised that one of the benefits of participating in the CP was the ability to explore areas that they find meaningful, suggesting that the programme offers a more personalised approach to learning.

#### Skills gained through the CP

Students were motivated to participate in the CP because of the skills they could gain that would be useful for university studies, enhancing their readiness for the challenges of university coursework.





In particular, students felt that the CP improved their writing and public-speaking skills. For example, with regard to writing at university level, one CP graduate remarked:

*“I’ve recently done a big physics scientific report and I actually know what to do and how to write scientifically from the CP and the applied science. So that really helped me in terms of research skills”.*

Additionally, students believed that the reflective project in particular helped them to develop their critical thinking, research and communication skills. With the possibility of choosing modern formats, such as a web page, film or essay, the reflective project was perceived as an effective innovation for preparing students for future careers.

Lastly, students believed the CP contributed to their personal growth, maturity and, particularly, confidence, as a year 13 student explained.

*“I would say personally, my confidence has improved because before doing the CP, it was not that I wasn’t a confident person, but I wasn’t confident in the work I was producing, or I would be maybe a little bit more shy to ask for help when I needed to be helped. Now ... I’m able to ask for help when I need it and be confident in the work I am producing and showing and also working by myself”.*

### **Challenges and support**

Some of the challenges that CP students identified included the workload required to complete the programme, time management, managing independent work and engaging in academically challenging content. However, students also noted

support structures available to them through the CP. They highlighted that these support structures were holistic in nature, helping with both academic and emotional challenges that students might experience while participating in the CP.

### **Teacher, coordinator and school leader perceptions of the CP**

#### **Preparation for a range of future pathways**

Many staff members reported that the CP allowed students to access a variety of pathways in higher education, employment or apprenticeship. As one coordinator remarked:

*“[The CP] genuinely prepares young people for higher or further education or work or apprenticeship. And we’ve got students who take all those routes from it, easily and happily. And I really like that. I think many 16-year-olds really cannot know where they are going to end up. The IB gives them a chance to develop those decisions rather than selecting a particular pathway at 16, which might not be where they want to be at 18. I think that suits our learners particularly well”.*

#### **Accessibility of the CP**

Staff noted that given the accessible nature of the CP, more students from lower socio-economic areas in Kent had the opportunity to gain the requisite skills for success in the future. Moreover, they shared the view that the CP enabled students from lower socio-economic backgrounds to aspire to, and gain entry to, higher education. In fact, for many of the students, they were the first in their family to attend university.



## Teaching experiences and professional development

Staff members were asked to reflect on how the CP has impacted their teaching experience and professional development (PD). Many staff suggested that the CP provides teachers with more freedom to creatively develop their teaching and learning approaches and to be more student-led. One coordinator stressed that the CP “feels like real teaching and learning”, as it’s about developing students’ “genuine understanding and connections”, which, in turn, has had a positive impact on the teaching experience. One CP teacher felt that teaching the CP was “empowering” because it provides more freedom to engage in teaching that utilizes the expertise of the individual teacher.

*“IB—it sort of matches up well with my perception of effective teaching and course construction. The idea that we get into this big theory of knowledge. Meta questions on how we understand what we understand, that’s always quite interesting to me. The idea that you need to sort of have this competent expertise in your subject matter, that you can pick the things that you need to pick. I think that’s really empowering for teachers to have that authority, as opposed to being sort of micromanaged in terms of everything you have to do. [The IB has] given me more confidence as a teacher. It’s also forced me to do a lot more reading and understanding a lot of different ways”.*

Teachers and IB coordinators highlighted that the CP provides the opportunity to engage in PD activities to advance learning and teaching experiences. Staff also noted that the CP had strengthened teacher collaboration within each participating school, and had helped to develop professional networks with staff from other CP schools. Staff recognised that these networks between schools in Kent helped them with the delivery of the programme and in responding to challenges.

## Quantitative survey findings

### Student responses

Overall, students expressed that participating in the CP provided a range of opportunities, with the highest rating ascribed to the development of their academic skills (see figure 2).

A total of 87% of students agreed that it is probably or definitely true that the CP offers an excellent opportunity to develop their academic skills. This is closely followed by 82% of students who agreed that it is probably or definitely true that the CP offers the opportunity to learn work-based skills. In total, 70% of students agreed that it is probably or definitely true that the CP has helped them to develop their personal skills, which will enable them to access post-school opportunities.



Figure 2. Student ratings of the benefits of participating in the CP

Moreover, they were happy with the three components of the CP (DP courses, CP core and career-related studies). Their ratings were highest for the career-related component, followed by the DP courses and the CP core. Students rated the core component lower largely due to the workload that was necessary to complete these requirements. Nevertheless, both year 12 and year 13 students appreciated the opportunity to develop their soft skills, which they believed would help them to function more effectively in the world.

**Staff responses**

Staff rated the initial CP training they received highly, but also provided recommendations for improving both initial and ongoing training. In particular, they indicated that training should focus more on subject knowledge and assessment procedures to assist with the delivery of the programme.

Additionally, staff members highlighted that the implementation of the CP would benefit from the elevation and recognition of the CP at four different levels—schools, students, parents and universities.

- **Schools:** Staff identified the most important factor in supporting CP implementation as buy-in from the leadership team (97% strongly agreed or agreed). 94% of CP staff rated “promotion of the CP within the school” as the second most important factor for successful CP implementation.
- **Students:** It was recommended that more outreach activities should be pursued to improve buy-in from students through “raising awareness of the CP to younger years” (CP coordinator).
- **Parents:** Another key recommendation was to invest in “educating parents [by] explaining differences to A level and reassuring university buy-in” (CP coordinator).
- **Universities:** Additionally, participants indicated that it was important to enhance the recognition of the CP at the university level and provided several suggestions in this regard. Specifically, they recommended clearly explaining the CP and its requirements, and ensuring that university admission staff are well informed about the benefits of the CP and its comparability to other educational programmes.





## Enablers of successful implementation of the CP

### Collaboration among schools

The findings highlighted that the implementation of the Kent project was supported by strong partnerships between the Kent local authority, key stakeholders from the IB, and senior leaders within the partner schools involved in the early pilot. After the initial pilot phase (2012–2016), two subsequent “hubs” were established in Kent that continued the collaboration between schools. This collaboration between schools was shown to be helpful in fostering staff buy-in for the CP, as one school leader noted, “they like the connection with other schools in Kent [...] there was great community and a community feeling of schools supporting each other”. Additionally, schools and staff were able to provide guidance, mentorship and knowledge-sharing on the authorisation process and in interpreting guidance material.

### Reducing the cost burden

The strength of networking among education professionals involved in the Kent project also helped ease the challenge of required training costs associated with the CP. The hubs were able to negotiate group-funding arrangements with the local authority for the initial CP training of staff to take place locally within Kent, which reduced the cost burden on individual schools. This approach demonstrates a viable and resource-oriented

example of how training may be achieved within other low-resource areas.

### Supportive school leadership and school culture

School leadership was identified as an important component that underpinned the successful implementation of the CP, particularly leadership that is guided by a culture of innovation. The buy-in of school leaders provides the foundation to develop a shared vision and steers the school culture to embed the programme from authorisation to delivery. Key stakeholders and school leaders highlighted that this culture of innovation needs to be shared at the whole-school level; one school leader explained:

*“If you’re going to try and implement it successfully, you have to throw your all into the CP completely ... [It] really needs a whole ethos of celebration and a real positivity about the fact that this programme is so transformational to students”.*

A notable success in Kent was that despite key stakeholders leaving their jobs or retiring, schools managed to successfully offer the CP and keep knowledge of the programme alive. This was due to the whole-school commitment to the vision of the CP, which made schools less vulnerable to staff turnover.

### Outcomes of CP students

Researchers analysed administrative data on student outcomes ( $n=379$ ) from 18 schools offering the CP in Kent.

With regard to career-related studies, most students engaged with a business-related course (17%) followed by health and social care (13%), sports (13%) and applied science (13%).

**Further, the data showed that 92% of students participating in the CP successfully completed the programme and achieved the CP certificate (CP certificate and CP bilingual certificate combined).**

Descriptive analysis showed that most of the students (55%) went on to attend universities, 17% were in employment, 16% were engaged in apprenticeship, and less than 1% were unemployed. It is also worth noting that a number of students on gap year planned to go to university; it is, therefore, likely that closer to 60% of students in this analysis were admitted to higher education after their CP studies in Kent (see figure 3).

## Recommendations for enhancing CP implementation

### Student recommendations

Students reported that they would benefit from a more strategic delivery of the workload, which would involve staggering elements of the programme across

the years. More specifically, students, particularly those in year 13, recommended that it would be useful to commence the reflective project earlier in the programme, which would provide them with additional time to complete the requirements. Students further explained that it would be useful to engage with more internal assessments during their first year of the CP, enabling them to allocate additional time to exam preparation. Students would also benefit from greater clarity of the assessment criteria, particularly for the reflective project. Lastly, students expressed a wish that more universities expand their understanding of the value and approach of the CP, a sentiment that was also shared by staff and key stakeholders.

### Teacher, coordinator and school leader recommendations

School staff identified the cost of PD for the CP as a challenge, particularly for under-resourced areas and state schools in Kent. Staff members also explained that there needed to be more effort to promote the CP to universities, parents, the local community and employers. Finally, staff members were eager to have more endorsement of the CP by the government to support the sustainability of the programme.

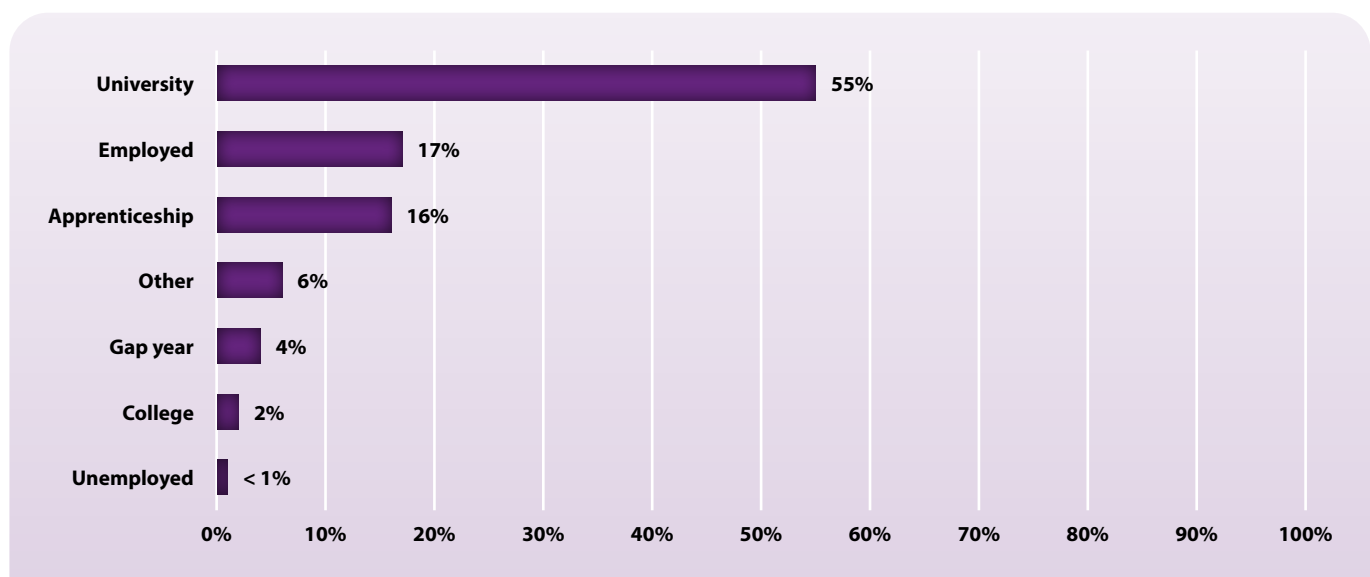


Figure 3. Post-CP student destinations



## Conclusions

The CP, with its focus on local knowledge, civic responsibility and personal growth, appears to have successfully inspired school leaders, teachers, coordinators and students in Kent. Key stakeholders, with assistance from Kent County Council and the local community, managed to build a network of support structures between schools and school leaders, from the early piloting phase, through the pandemic and to the present.

Overall, students and staff rated their experiences of participating in the CP as positive and beneficial for their own development. Participating in the CP provided students with a range of opportunities to enter diverse pathways, including academic and vocational fields, and staff benefitted from the PD opportunities afforded by the CP. While there was support and buy-in for the CP at the student and school level, the study revealed opportunities to further strengthen implementation through buy-in at the parent and university level.

The current success story in Kent strongly warrants further attention. The findings of this study suggest that the CP provides the prospect of better life opportunities for a generation of students from less privileged backgrounds.

## References

International Baccalaureate. (2014). *Programme standards and practices*. International Baccalaureate Organization.

International Baccalaureate. (2015). *Overview of the Career-related Programme*. International Baccalaureate Organization.

This summary was developed by the IB Research department. A copy of the full report is available at: [www.ibo.org/en/research/](http://www.ibo.org/en/research/). For more information on this study or other IB research, please email [research@ibo.org](mailto:research@ibo.org).

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