

University readiness and the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme in Australia

Dr Michael Thier, IB Research department, March 2026



The Diploma Programme

Offered during the senior secondary years, the Diploma Programme (DP) is designed to prepare students for success in higher education. The DP requires studies in six subject groups alongside a core that enhances students' educational experience by challenging them to apply their knowledge and skills. The DP's six subject groups are as follows.

1. Studies in language and literature (e.g. language and literature or literature)
2. Language acquisition (e.g. classical languages, Mandarin, Spanish)
3. Individuals and societies (e.g. business management, economics, history, psychology)
4. Sciences (e.g. biology, chemistry, computer science, physics)
5. Mathematics (e.g. analysis and approaches, applications and interpretation)
6. The arts (e.g. film, music, theatre, visual arts)

Typically, DP candidates' six subjects include three at higher level (HL; at least 240 hours of teaching time) and three at standard level (SL; at least 150 hours of teaching time). The core includes:

- a series of student-driven experiences in the areas of creativity, activity, service (CAS)
- a 4,000-word academic research paper on a topic of student choice—the extended essay (EE)
- the theory of knowledge (TOK) course, which emphasizes critical thinking.

Assessment of DP subjects includes both work completed during the course and final examinations.

The DP and university readiness

Recent research provides evidence that the DP curriculum is designed to prepare students for success at university, which is supported by DP students' higher education outcomes.

Curriculum research

Ecctis (2022) examined curricula in mathematics and sciences to compare the DP with Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) courses (foundation mathematics, general mathematics, further mathematics, mathematical methods, specialist mathematics, biology, chemistry, physics and history).¹ Overall, HL courses in the DP tend to surpass corresponding VCE courses in both content and demand. Meanwhile, SL courses in the DP tend to be comparable to corresponding VCE courses. These findings suggest that DP students in Australia receive an education that prepares them for university success because their secondary preparation meets or exceeds the rigour of one of Australia's most recognizable senior secondary qualifications.

Student outcomes research

Researchers from the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) compared outcomes among six cohorts of DP students in Australia against the full national populations of their respective non-DP peers² (Hillman et al., 2024). Across all six cohorts, DP students achieved statistically significantly better outcomes than those of non-DP students, specifically:

- gaining offers of university admission at rates about 10 percentage points higher (see figure 1)
- persisting into their second year of study at rates about 4 percentage points higher (see figure 2)
- completing university for all check points examined within the study (4, 6 and 9 years after commencement) at rates about 5, 10 and 12 percentage points higher (see figure 3).

¹ The IB and Ecctis selected Victoria for study because it has the largest number of IB World Schools in Australia.

² ACER researchers examined all Australian nationals who applied to and entered an Australian university between 2013 and 2018. In Australia and some other national contexts, DP and non-DP students differ in notable ways. Specifically in Australia, the DP student population has a higher concentration of female students, higher-achieving students and students from a higher socio-economic background. To address some of these differences, ACER researchers compared groups within the populations that are more alike, for example, by gender and socio-economic status.

In addition, DP students exhibited the following “added layer of benefit” in university outcomes.

- Overall persistence and completion rates were already higher for female students compared to male students, but they were higher still for female DP students compared to female non-DP students.
- Completing the DP appears to advantage students’ university-completion rates across a range of socio-economic backgrounds. In all but one case, DP students had statistically significantly higher completion rates 9 years after commencement than peers with the same gender and socio-economic status (SES) (see figure 4).

Findings from these curricular and outcomes studies depict DP students as ready to succeed at Australian universities.



Figure 1. Offers of university admission were significantly higher for DP students than for non-DP students for all cohorts (2013–2018)

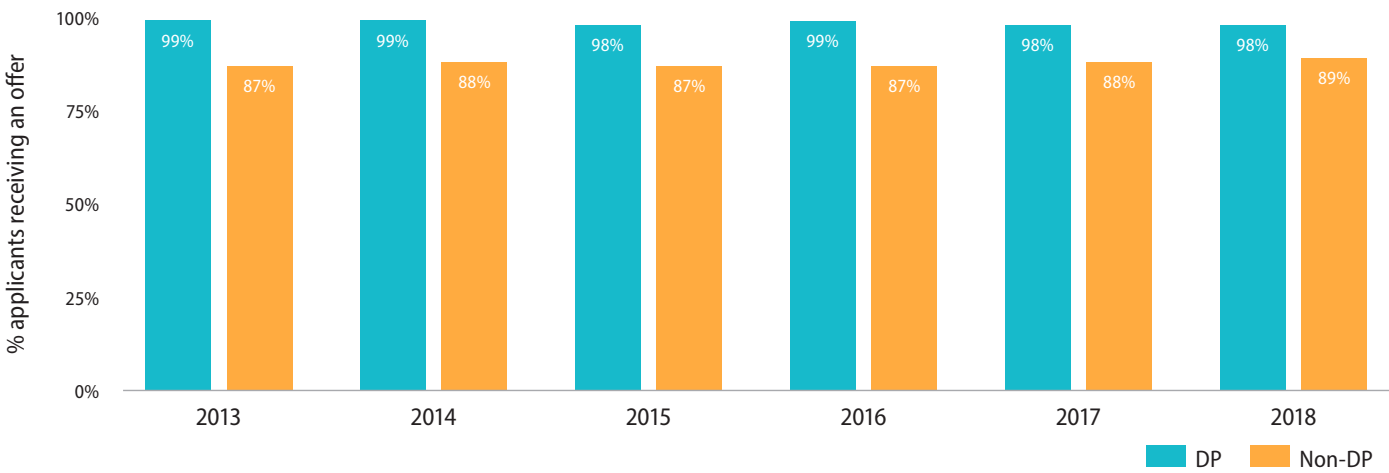


Figure 2. Persistence rates were significantly higher for DP students than for non-DP students for all cohorts (2013–2018)

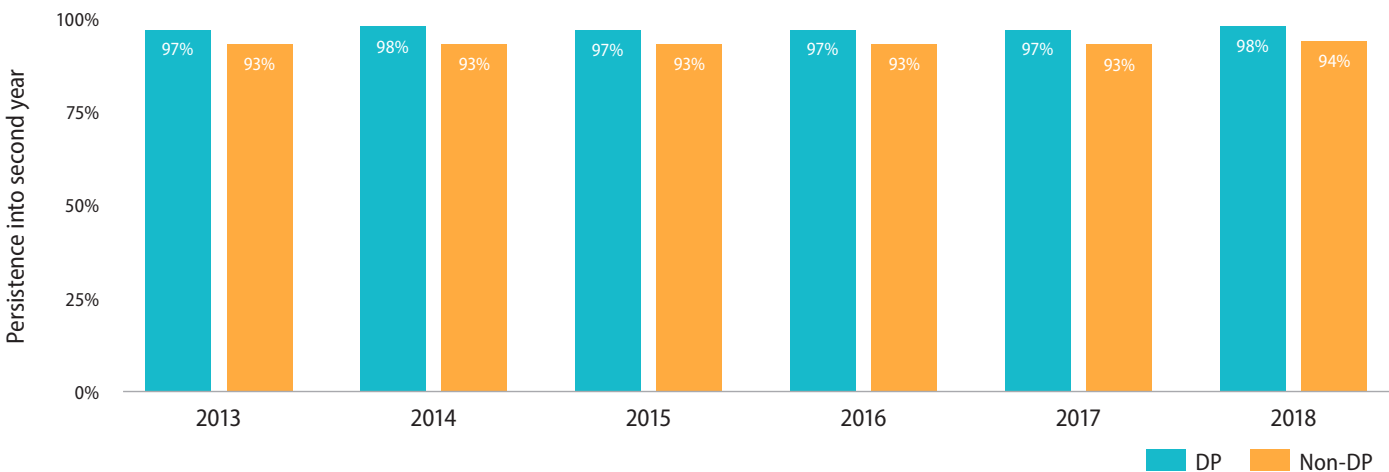


Figure 3. University completion rates were significantly higher for DP students than for non-DP students for all cohorts (2013–2018) and check points after commencement (4, 6 and 9 years)

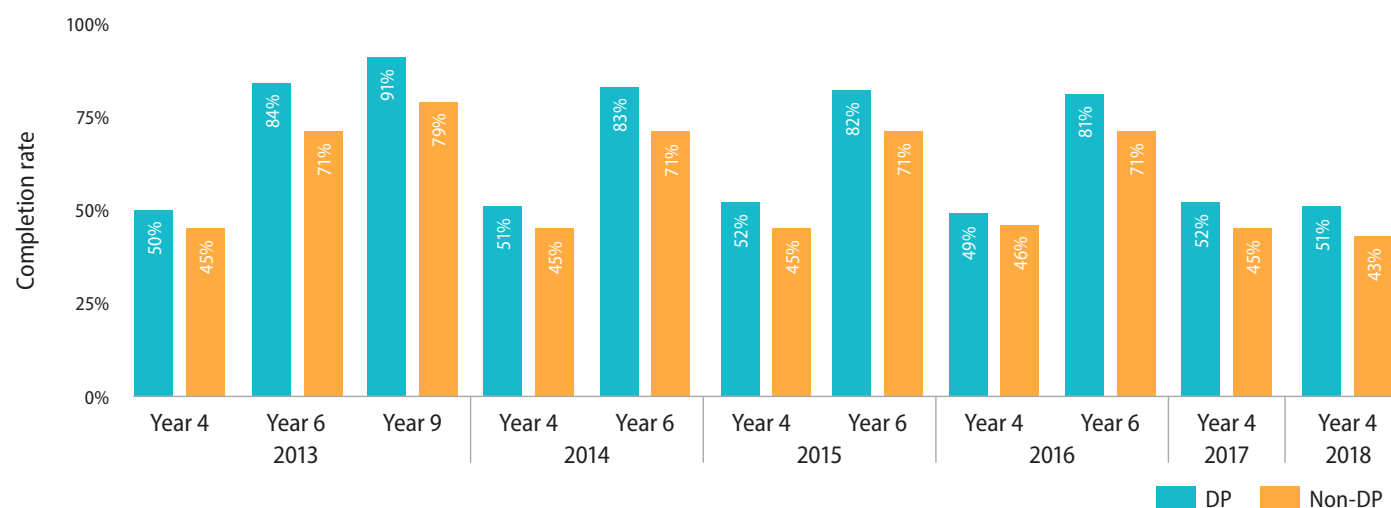
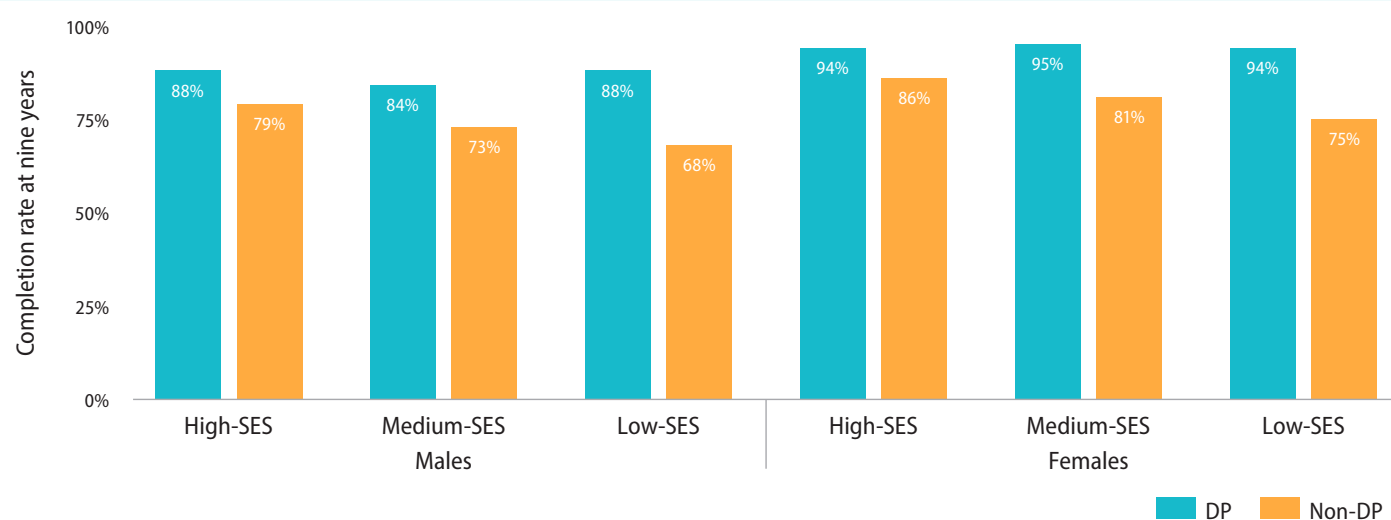


Figure 4. Nine-year university completion rates (2013 cohort) were significantly higher for DP students than for non-DP students in all cases except for males from low socio-economic backgrounds

Note. The result for males from low socio-economic backgrounds was likely not significant due to an imbalance in the sizes of the DP and non-DP groups.



References

- Ecctis. (2022). *DP country alignment studies: Alignment of the Diploma Programme with the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE)*. International Baccalaureate Organization. <https://www.ibo.org/globalassets/new-structure/research/pdfs/ib-dp-country-studies-victoria-alignment-report-en.pdf>
- Hillman, K., Edwards, D., & Clarke, L. The Australian Council for Educational Research. (2024). *Australian university outcomes: A national study comparing International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme and non-Diploma Programme students*. International Baccalaureate Organization. <https://ibo.org/globalassets/new-structure/research/pdfs/2024-australian-university-outcomes-full-report.pdf>