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The International Baccalaureate

The International Baccalaureate is gaining ground worldwide as a highly regarded high school graduation qualification. The unique nature of its curriculum also means that it is particularly appealing to international students, as **BETHAN NORRIS** reports.

When asked why they decided to start offering the International Baccalaureate Diploma to their students, high school staff worldwide are effusive in their praise of the qualification. Janet Sailian from Branksome Hall in Toronto, ONT, Canada, enthuses, "The IB truly prepares young people to make a difference in the world, to be internationally minded and to understand others' perspectives." She adds that the enquiry-based curriculum is "excellent preparation to be a successful, contributing citizen of a fast changing world".

The IB diploma for 16-to-19 year olds is an internationally recognised qualification that is being increasingly used to assess academic ability for student graduating from high school. The number of schools offering the IB diploma is growing every year and in some schools the qualification has completely replaced any other exams offered for this age group. Emily Weltchek from St Timothy's School in Stevenson, MD in the USA says that their first group of IB students graduated this year after the curriculum was introduced in 2006. "Colleges across the country view the IB as the most rigorous secondary school curriculum that is currently offered," she says. "It is certainly a viable alternative to other high school graduate exams. I would say it is a more prestigious honour to graduate with an IB diploma."

St Clare's, Oxford in the UK is one school that has offered the IB diploma for over 30 years and Francisco Bustos says that the exam is particularly suited to a broad range of nationalities. "Most students coming from overseas already have experience of a broad-based syllabus," he says, "including more than one foreign language, world literature and mathematics as core subjects, making the option of A-levels a poor one."

In the UK, the growth of the IB is being fuelled by a concern among higher education institutions in the country that traditional A-levels, which are used to determine university entry, are no longer able to distinguish between the brightest pupils. For many schools and universities, the IB is therefore seen as superior in this regard. Mary Hart-Danby from Tasis The American School in England in Surrey, UK, says, "While the British system of A-levels has suffered increasing criticism to the point that universities are considering introducing their own entrance examinations, the IB is widely accepted by university admissions as a hallmark of achievement. The top IB score of 45 is achieved by fewer than one per cent of candidates."

This high regard is also seen in other countries worldwide. Don Smith from Verde Valley School in Sedona, AZ in the USA says that students and their families are becoming more familiar with the IB due to its good reputation. "Many many US universities have special recognition programmes of IB diploma holders," he says. "Our students know that with the IB diploma they will be sought out by more selective universities in the USA and they will be exceedingly well prepared to succeed at university."

In New Zealand too, Francis McWhannell from Auckland International College (AIC) attests that the qualification is recognised by all the universities in the country. In addition, "Many AIC students wish to study at universities outside New Zealand and the IB diploma certainly gives them an advantage," she notes, adding, "AIC graduates have been accepted to such competitive institutions as Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Princeton and Brown Universities, Dartmouth College and the Universities

of Cambridge, Oxford and Pennsylvania."

Kristin School in Auckland, New Zealand has offered the IB diploma to students for the past 20 years and Jenny Taylor at the school says that more schools in the country are now looking at offering the programme. "The number of IB schools in New Zealand will almost double in the next couple of years with several independent schools planning to introduce the programme in the next year or so," she relates.

The popularity of the IB with schools, universities and students lies in its broad curriculum as well as international focus, with students able to study their own language as their mother tongue and also gain expertise in at least one other language. The two elements that are particularly valued as distinguishing the qualification from other high school diplomas are the 4,000 word extended essay, which all students must complete, and the Creativity, Action and Service (CAS) requirement, which takes place outside the classroom.

Jeanine Valmadre from Kardinia International College in Geelong, VIC, Australia, says of the CAS, "Some students would never have explored

beyond what was comfortable and known [to them]. They speak very thoughtfully and movingly about their life-changing experiences beyond the classroom."

The extended essay is another element that prepares students

for the academic rigour needed to go on to higher education. Val Proctor from Haileybury in Hertford, UK, says, "Pupils who have studied the IB make excellent university students, as they accrue the necessary skills of independent learning, motivation and time management through the rigours of balancing the multiple aspects of the diploma programme."

While undoubtedly requiring a high level of academic ability, Bustos believes that the diploma programme should be available to all students. "Students should always be given the choice of studying for the diploma programme," he says. "There is a myth that the IB diploma caters only for the clever and academically-able student, whereas the determining factor is actually motivation."

Another factor that makes the programme appealing to schools is its progressive reputation in terms of course development. Ben Hales from Doncaster College in the UK says, "The IB Organisation (IBO) doesn't sit on its laurels but is constantly reviewing and improving the curriculum and new subjects appear each year." The IBO also encourages and welcomes input from both teachers and students which, says Hales, "makes it a more receptive organisation than we are used to dealing with".

Elrwen Stevenson from Lauriston Girls School in Armadale, WA, Australia says that new courses are continually introduced in response to new developments. "For example," she says, "the new Environmental Systems course being examined for the first time in 2009 is one of the trans-disciplinary courses that recognise the sometimes artificial nature of the current boundaries between disciplines." Stevenson sums up what many educators are keen to relay: "There is a feeling about the diploma that it is alive and responsive and going places." ■



PHOTOGRAPH: HALEYBURY

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