



The Benefits of the International Baccalaureate: A Student's Perspective...

By Rachael Hart

The benefits of the International Baccalaureate have often been equated with the opportunity for IB graduates to study overseas. For me, this aspect was less important than the opportunity it gave me to develop as a student, an individual, and a participant in a global world.

What makes up the IB?

There are a number of components that students must complete for the IB. They must do two languages (most often this is their native language and another), a mathematics, a science, a social science, and either an arts subject or another language, social science or science. At least three of these subjects must be taken at higher level. This strict regulation of subjects is often seen as being quite restrictive. I didn't notice that aspect, as I probably would have chosen the same range of subjects had

I done the HSC. This suggests that the IB attracts students who are interested in gaining a well-rounded education, and not prepared to limit themselves to one style of learning. In fact, the IB allowed me to study a broader range of subjects than I would have been able to with the HSC, as I was not limited by the number of units. Through the system of higher level and standard level I was able to focus more on the humanities subjects, which are my passion, as well as gaining a sound understanding of the sciences.

The international component of the IB is a significant one. Underpinning a large part of the syllabus for each subject is understanding on a global level. In English a certain number of books must be studied that were originally written in another language; in theatre arts there is an emphasis on non-western styles of theatre; and even in chemistry, we were encouraged to evaluate the effects of chemical industries and production on a global level.

The IB allows students to study areas in which they are really interested. In each subject, there is a component where students must formulate their own questions on whatever interests them. For example, in History, I wrote a 3000 word essay comparing the 'Concept of Freedom for the Leaders of the Easter Uprising in Dublin in 1916' and the Irish negotiators of the Anglo-Irish treaty. Others in my class chose to study elements as diverse as propaganda in Nazi Germany, and sacrifice in Aztec societies. These areas of study were not at all directed by our teacher, but reflected our own interests.

Combined with this is a compulsory 4000 word essay (called the Extended Essay) that can be written on any topic so long as it falls in one of the IB subjects, although not necessarily ones that the student is doing. This gave me an opportunity to study an area that I had not encountered before, but in which I was interested. I chose to write my essay in the subject area 'World Religions'. My question was 'How did the Discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls Affect our Understanding of the Early Development of the Hebrew Bible?'

Before starting this assignment, I didn't even know what the Dead Sea Scrolls were!

The impulse for writing an essay in World Religions, was from Barbara Kingsolver's novel *The Poisonwood Bible*. Part of the novel was concerned with language, and how the meanings of phrases in the Bible had changed over time. In looking for information on this in libraries, I kept coming across references to the Dead Sea Scrolls, and so decided to shift to incorporate them into my study. It soon became clear that they could form the basis of my essay. I did not formulate the question until a long way into the research process.

The Extended Essay gave me the opportunity to develop my academic writing skills. Instead of simply being given a topic, I had to develop my own, based on where my interest led me. I can really see the benefits of this at University, where many people are still struggling with the idea of research and referencing, which are now natural for me.

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Another compulsory component of the IB is a philosophy-style subject called 'Theory of Knowledge'. In this we asked and were asked questions such as:

- How do we know?
- What does it mean to know something?
- What knowledge can Maths give us?
- What knowledge can English give us?
- What are their limitations?

This subject helped develop skills for assessing information that was given to me. I learnt to question assumptions, pull apart arguments and develop my own theories in a way that I never have before.

The final component of the IB is called Creativity, Action, Service (CAS). The IB emphasises a well-rounded education, and this includes extra-curricular activity. As students, we had to complete a certain number of hours of creative activity (I took singing lessons, sang in a choir, learnt drama – others did courses in mosaics, art, musical instruments etc), action (I did ballet, others did rowing, softball, etc), and community service (I helped Year 2 students with reading activities, and participated in fundraising organisations such as Interact – a club run by Rotary in which high school students raise money for a number of charities of their choice). This meant that the IB encouraged us to stay fit and healthy (as well as developing skills in a particular sport), fostered a creative strain, and helped us recognise how we could contribute to our communities.

Assessment

The IB is assessed on a criteria basis, and does not attempt to 'rank' students. Potentially every student can achieve full marks. This means that work becomes less competitive, and that students feel more inclined to help each other. This took the form of giving feedback on essays, in class presentations and just general psychological support. This was done with the understanding that when we needed help it would be given in return. This principle of reciprocity played an important part in our learning process. By understanding others' weaknesses and strengths, we could develop our own styles. The support we gave

each other in cases such as the Extended Essay, also meant that we gained an informed understanding of a variety of areas.

IB assessment takes two forms: internal and external. In most subjects, the external assessment takes the form of exams, and usually a small number of major assignments such as essays, taped oral presentations, practicals for science or a portfolio for Maths. The internal assessments are handed back and forth between teachers and students until students are satisfied that this is the best that they can achieve. The opportunity to reflect, to continue striving to improve, to witness your own development in understanding and ability to articulate your ideas gives a tremendous boost to your sense of self worth and your confidence. Come the exams and the skills you have

gained, the confidence you have and the depth of the study that you have done, means that the exams are not the nail-biting, nerve-wracking trial that you might expect.

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Overall

The IB helped me foster a passion for learning, discovering, analysing and understanding. It has prepared me significantly for further studies at university and a life full of opportunities to learn, gain and develop skills.

Rachael Hart completed the International Baccalaureate at MLC School in 2002. She received a score of 41, which has a UAI equivalent of 99.45. She is currently studying a Bachelor of Arts (Advanced) at the University of Sydney. As well as her studies, she also enjoys ballet, singing, and drama.

...Why choose the International Baccalaureate?: A Parent's Perspective

By Fiona Hollier

Our first exposure to the International Baccalaureate was at an information evening when our eldest daughter, Rachael, was in Yr 10. We attended out of interest and a sense of thoroughness, not because we were looking for an alternative to the HSC. In fact, we favoured sticking to the HSC. After all, it was what almost all other students would complete in NSW. No credentialing system is perfect, but the HSC serves its purpose well and has many merits. MLC School (our daughters' school) had an impressive HSC track record and to go 'off-shore' seemed like a betrayal, yet another example of cultural cringe.

As the evening progressed, we felt increasingly discomfited. Perhaps we would abandon the HSC after all, and risk the less familiar route of the IB. We did, but what caused us to shift?

We were impressed by the breadth of study within the IB, the potential for individual choice, the opportunity to develop and follow a passion, the autonomous learning and the inclusion of CAS (Creativity, Action and Service). We listened to the visiting students and heard how they had become engaged and excited by the IB. I recalled my own education and remembered how I had disengaged in late high school, only to become excited again by learning at University when I was able to follow my passions. This was the clincher! I wanted our daughter to continue to be excited by learning, and so this seemed to be the criterion by which to judge a course of study.

By the close of the evening, Rachael was excited. She was enthusiastic about the *Theory of Knowledge*, the international focus and by the opportunities to choose focus areas for study. She also loved the idea of doing extensive research and working in a highly autonomous way. It seemed a good match, with the breadth and flexibility of the IB suiting Rachael's approach to learning. She easily chose the subjects she would do and at what level. From that moment on, neither Rachael nor we doubted that she had made anything but a very appropriate choice.

Two years later, our second daughter, Naomi, has also chosen the IB. As well as the international focus of the IB, the deciding factor for Naomi was that the IB enabled her to continue studying subjects from across the curriculum. She had identified 17 units of study that she would want to undertake for the HSC; but probably a realistic maximum is 13. Naomi would have had

to either drop one or more subjects, or not do the harder, extension courses. Neither of these options appealed. The IB is structured in a way that allowed Naomi to maintain a full range of subjects and to study more than half of these at Higher Level.

Having experienced the IB we are now able to expand on what we see as its strengths. These would be strengths for any student who is committed to an academic course of study, and is interested in learning. The IB's strengths are particularly relevant to gifted and talented students.

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IB students study the Theory of Knowledge (TOK): as a family we are keen on learning that encourages reflection and critical thinking. This is what *Theory of Knowledge* does. It helps students become more aware of how they know what they know and to recognise the impact of subjective interpretation and bias. They thus become much more critical consumers of information. The interdisciplinary nature of the subject and the scope of the topics for discussion contributes strongly to the international focus of the course, which is then reinforced through the international elements of the subject areas.

The IB requires breadth and depth of study

As well as *Theory of Knowledge*, students undertaking the IB choose one subject from each of five curriculum areas and one additional subject from anyone of these curriculum areas. The curriculum areas are:

- First Language
- Second Language
- Individual and Societies
- Experimental Sciences
- Maths and Computer Studies.

Three or four of these subjects must be studied at Higher Level. Our daughters both chose English, German, History, Chemistry, Maths and Theatre Arts.

Our experience was that all the courses of study were rigorous and demanding. What is attractive to us about the IB is that it requires continuance of academic subjects from all disciplines, and so gives a broad liberal education. (The HSC, on the other hand, offers a more diverse range of subjects, some with strong vocational emphasis. The HSC also tends to encourage specialisation, particularly for students who are keen to study

subjects at extension level or who choose subjects from a narrow band of curriculum areas.)

IB students have many opportunities to study topics of special interest

Within courses, students choose their own study topics, research these independently, and refine a research question to complete a major piece of work. Our experience was that Rachael became passionate and very motivated about these studies. She spent hours in libraries and on the Internet, gaining knowledge well beyond the requirements of the assessment task, and drafting and redrafting her essays until she felt it really distilled the essence of what she wanted to say.

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For example in history, Rachael researched and wrote an essay on *To What Extent Did the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 Fulfill the Concept of 'Freedom' Fought For in the Easter Uprising of 1916?* Naomi is still developing her research question; so far, it is *To What Extent was the Governor General Justified in Dismissing the Labor Government in 1975?*

These are very different individual choices based on particular interests.

The Extended Essay (4000 words) offers opportunity for study outside particular courses, often across curriculum areas. Rachael studied the contribution of the Dead Sea Scrolls to understanding the Hebrew Bible; her friends looked at areas which included the structure of the book *Frankenstein* and the impact of the Internet on languages other than English.

The IB assessment process facilitates continuous learning

Assessment in schools increasingly relies on a balance of continuous assessment and final exams. I have been in favour of this approach and so one of the downsides of the IB seemed to be that more of the final grade was based on the final exams (although this does vary from subject to subject). While there are obvious advantages in the assessment approach of the HSC, I have been pleased to find that there are also significant advantages in the IB assessment approach.

- *Assessment activities that do not contribute directly towards the IB grade are seen as learning tools.* Rachael and her friends tended to regard tests, essays and even exams as tools for giving them feedback on their progress. They did not expect 'top' marks until near the end of the course. I heard one student liken it to training for the Olympics – she felt that she could pace herself and continue improving to deliver her peak performance at the end of the two year period of study. She went on to say that HSC students needed to be performing at peak throughout Yr 12, because the assessment was relentless. This had the added benefit of the IB students feeling and behaving in a surprisingly relaxed way. They did not have the next assessment task always hanging over their heads. Also, because the IB students did not feel in competition with each other, they consulted extensively giving feedback to each other and sharing notes and ideas. They could benefit from the shared learning and not be concerned about whether a final mark would fairly reflect different levels of effort.
- *Students are expected and encouraged to refine assessment tasks that contribute to the final grade.* The IB assessment tasks are major pieces of work. Students know from the beginning of Year 11 what these tasks are, the submission dates, the criteria by which the assignment will be assessed, and the grade that matches the criteria. They can submit an early version, get feedback from their teachers about that

version, resubmit and so on until they are satisfied. It is May 2003 and Naomi has started her preliminary work on an assignment that has a submission date of August 2004. This timeframe also facilitates students managing competing priorities. They can plan their work to accommodate busy periods in sport, debating, dance, drama or music performance.

- *Students are well prepared for final exams:* Because Rachael was so engaged by what she was learning, had read so widely in each of her subjects, understood what she would be assessed on in her exams and had adequate time for revision, she approached the exams with confidence. Her experience reflected her friend's analogy about preparation for Olympics and peak performance.

In the IB, students can score a total of 45 marks. (Each of their 6 courses is marked out of 7, and the Extended essay, *Theory of Knowledge* and CAS contributes up to a further 3 marks.) Scores between 30 and 45 convert to UAI equivalents of between 90 and 99.95. Rachael predicted her score to within a mark of what she received (which converted to a difference of only 0.15% in her UAI ranking.) This accuracy was common amongst her friends. This is obviously a testament to the clarity of the requirements, how well MLC understood, interpreted and met those requirements and the conscientious efforts and enthusiasm of the students themselves.

The IB requires students to participate in creativity, action and service (CAS)

Neither of our daughters have given up any of their extra curricular activities, which include a range of sporting, music, dance, drama and speaking activities. The IB service requirement dovetails well with school leadership and house opportunities and Duke of Edinburgh awards. For our daughters, the IB did not demand anything of them that they would not already have done. However, it reflects well upon the IB that it acknowledges and encourages effort in areas beyond the curriculum that help to develop the 'whole' person, as well as tempering the inclination of some students to become single minded in their study.

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The IB prepares students well for tertiary study

Rachael has begun Arts Advanced at Sydney University feeling very confident about how to research, to write essays, to reference correctly and how to work autonomously. The IB is well regarded by Universities. Rachael is being given advanced standing in English, starting her course at second year level.

Whatever 'risk' we felt at first in embarking on the IB disappeared with our familiarity with the course, the clarity of the criteria based assessment and Rachael's enjoyment of and interest in what she was learning. We shared her fascination, learnt much ourselves about areas of which we knew little as we talked about her assignments, and watched her gain confidence and skills in articulating complex and sophisticated ideas. The IB required diligence and presented challenges, but it did not become an ordeal for either Rachael or for us, her family. We feel that the IB was an excellent choice for Rachael, and it is proving to be so for Naomi as well.

Fiona Hollier's two daughters at MLC School, Burwood both chose to study the International Baccalaureate. Her younger son has also expressed interest in the IB. Fiona is an accredited mediator running her own business, in partnership with her husband, as a workplace educator and facilitator, specialising in conflict resolution, team development, communication, negotiation and leadership skills.

The International Baccalaureate Diploma - a curriculum for the gifted: A teacher's perspective

By Alan Harper

Appropriate educational provision for gifted students will always be a complex and controversial area. One's expectations of, and criteria for assessing, any programme will depend on one's starting point. For parents, frustrated through watching their son or daughter become increasingly bored or disinterested with standard provisions, any programme which offers stimulation and intellectual satisfaction may be viewed very positively.

However, there is an alternative, or at least complementary, viewpoint to be considered. In a society which places ever more increasing value on educational credentials, there is certainly a case to be made that programmes undertaken by gifted students should, ideally, deliver them a recognisable credential to reward and certificate the effort invested, and learning gained, from the programme.

For students in upper secondary school, such a programme is offered by the International Baccalaureate. Not only does the Diploma programme offer a distinctive and challenging curriculum; it culminates in the award of a valuable credential of world standing.

The International Baccalaureate Diploma

The International Baccalaureate (IB) was born in international schools. In relatively parochial Australia, we are less aware than we should be of the large and growing international community of business people, diplomats and professionals, who live and work around the globe. In the past, their frequent moves from country to country, and educational system to educational system, created severe discontinuities for their children, who often emerged from school with significant gaps in their knowledge and skills. The IB offered, initially for international schools only, an international curriculum which would allow students in Years 11 and 12 to move relatively seamlessly around the world, picking up in their new school where they had left off in their old, and emerging with a recognisable credential for which they had been able to be properly prepared.

Since those early days, the IB has grown in popularity, not only with international schools, but also with many national schools, which offer it either as an alternative to, or sometimes instead of, the national credential. In NSW there is now a growing number of independent schools offering the IB.

The IB and Gifted students

While the IB was certainly not designed just with gifted students in mind, it has many features which make it an attractive and challenging curriculum for such students. Initially, this was probably due to the fact that the average ability of students in international schools tends to be higher than that of universal populations, for reasons which are probably not all that difficult to guess at.

What features of the IB are suited to the gifted?

“Horizons are lifted, and local views and mindsets are placed in a larger perspective”

Internationalism

The very internationalism of the IB provides students with a broadening experience. Horizons are lifted, and local views and mindsets are placed in a larger perspective by a curriculum which is determinedly international, and unshackled by peculiarly national underpinnings. Syllabi are developed by educators from around the world, representing the very wide sweep of IB schools across every continent. So are examinations, which are also marked internationally by subject experts located across the globe.

Thus, in subjects like History, for example, the foci are international, with no room for jingoistic or parochial approaches which limit the view of History to one nation's story. In Science subjects, the standards and perspectives are those of the finest scientific nations of the world, unburdened by fashionable trends or soft options which can contaminate local curricula. Subjects such as Economics, and Business and Management, also gain much from the international backdrop against which they are set.

A further advantage of the IB's internationalism is that the Diploma is the creature of no government, and subject to no political agenda. The International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO) is centred in Cardiff (Wales) and Geneva, with regional offices around the world, and is completely free of governmental control. This has allowed some of the world's finest educators to develop excellent curriculum, and establish very high levels of achievement.

“...students are prevented from avoiding subjects which challenge them;”

Breadth

Unlike many national curricula, which allow students to specialise in pet subject areas, the IB mandates breadth. Every student must study six major disciplines, covering at least five domains of knowledge. IB students study:

- Language A (i.e. their first Language)
- Language B (i.e. a second Language.) Ab initio Languages are available for those with no background.
- Mathematics
- An experimental Science
- A humanities subject
- Either a creative subject or a second subject from one of the preceding five groups.

However, specialisation of sorts is allowed, with each student taking three of his/her subjects at Higher Level (HL), and three at Standard Level (SL). Nevertheless, students are prevented from avoiding subjects which challenge them; confronting such challenges ensures balanced intellectual growth – very important for gifted students.

Mathematics

The IB offers four courses in Mathematics, two at Standard Level, one at Higher Level, and an 'extension' course which build on the HL course. The HL course represents Mathematics at a very challenging level, in fact at a level beyond the abilities of some Maths teachers to teach. The additional Further Mathematics course takes students into the realms of second year University Mathematics and would, frankly, be beyond any but the most gifted students.

Foreign Language Study

Educators of gifted students will know that many have a deep interest in Languages per se, and studying a foreign Language can be the hallmark of a highly intelligent student. It would be redundant here, I am sure, to point out the broadening experience of learning the Language of other peoples, and the way in which it allows one to see the world through another's eyes, and with another's assumptions.

Yet in Australia, we are not Language learners. We have convinced ourselves as a nation that learning a foreign Language is

only for an academic élite, and the levels of achievement we celebrate often fall far short of standards regarded as routine around the world.

The IB offers second Language study at world standards, and the uncompromised aim of IB Language learning is the achievement of mastery. This can be the undoing of some Australian IB candidates, but, for gifted students, can provide the very level of challenge they need. The IB offers a very wide range of second Languages (the challenge is usually to find a teacher!), as one would expect of a truly international curriculum. Incidentally, they include both Latin and Classical Greek.

Special Features

To the unsympathetic reader, some of the above may sound like special pleading for a curriculum which is not essentially far different from that on offer locally. While I would reject such a view, the special features of the IB really do distinguish it as a highly distinctive curriculum, and as one ideally suited to the gifted student.

The Theory of Knowledge

Every IB student must study *The Theory of Knowledge* (TOK) for the two years of the Diploma programme. For many, it is a real challenge, but for some, it is the 'jewel in the crown' of the IB curriculum. TOK is nothing less than a course in epistemology, or the philosophy of knowledge. Students are challenged to get behind the knowledge that has accrued around various subject disciplines, and to question its origin and foundations. Why do scientists use 'scientific method?' What is the nature of historical knowledge? How do philosophical understandings affect how we relate to the world around us? How does language shape cognition? What are the limitations of rationalism? How does Post-Modernism affect our concept of knowledge? On what grounds can moral, aesthetic and political judgments be made?

These and other questions are grist to the mill of gifted students, who will often go in search of courses offering such intellectual delicacies.

Part of the assessment for the IB Diploma involves a compulsory TOK essay, which contributes directly to the student's final result. For many gifted students, this is like being paid to have fun!

The Extended Essay

Another compulsory component of the final assessment for the Diploma is the submission of an Extended Essay. For students at matriculation level, this represents their equivalent of a thesis, with the emphasis on the creation of new knowledge. The topic can be drawn from any of the disciplines the student is studying for the Diploma, and thus allows for that level of specialisation which gifted students often crave.

The Extended Essay is something over which, ideally, students labour for well over twelve months. The depth of research they can undertake is unlimited, and, indeed, the most able students will invest enormous energy in this labour of love.

Not only does the essay itself offer a great opportunity for intellectual satisfaction, but it has a concomitant benefit too. A feature of many gifted education programmes is the use of mentors for the students. Mentors can provide the intellectual companionship often yearned for by highly able students. An integral part of undertaking the Extended Essay is to secure and work with a mentor who, like a University supervisor of a research degree, oversees the student's progress and helps them shape their final essay for submission. The relationships which can emerge from this process can be deeply fulfilling in their own right, as any good mentoring programme can be.

Community, Action, Service

A third distinctive feature of the IB Diploma is the Community, Action and Service (CAS) component. Philosophically, IBO takes the view that education is greater than just an individual academic enterprise, but involves as well dimensions relating to one's broader personal development, and one's place within and contribution to the community.

CAS requires students to develop an involvement in their community, and to make a contribution to it. This can take many forms, including sporting, musical, theatrical and artistic activities, and community service. CAS is designed to counterbalance the

academic self absorption which can characterise some highly focused students, through the development of compassionate and active citizenship.

This element will resonate with parents of some gifted students, who tend towards an exclusively academic lifestyle, but

“CAS is designed to counterbalance the academic self absorption which can characterise some highly focused students,”

equally with those of students who display that common characteristic of the gifted, a deep concern for social justice and the well being of others.

A Credential of Worth

Two years of intensive study. Six subjects, some at HL, some at SL. Intense Language study. TOK. An Extended Essay. CAS. The IB is certainly a demanding and challenging curriculum, but a rewarding one too.

The rewards are not limited to the intellectual excitement associated with the many academic challenges to be met and goals to be reached. That is a feature of many programmes designed to stimulate and satisfy gifted students.

At the end of the IB Diploma programme, students emerge with a credential which rewards their efforts in a most tangible way. Not only is the IB Diploma understood and accepted by all Australian Universities, but it is also readily accepted by Universities around the world, including virtually all of the most prestigious institutions to which students might aspire.

The strength of the IB Diploma, and the track record of the IB Diplomats, has accorded it a worldwide respect in academic circles which has seen some Universities actively solicit IB graduates for their courses.

Two years of satisfying academic challenge, ideal for many gifted students, can also provide the key which will unlock an exciting educational future at some of the world's finest institutions.

Why would you not at least consider the IB for a gifted child?

A growing number of schools in NSW and the ACT are now offering the IB Diploma, and can advise in detail on the programme. These include:

Boys' schools

- Trinity Grammar School, Sydney

Girls' Schools

- MLC School, Sydney
- New England Girls' Grammar School, Armidale
- Queenwood, Sydney

Coeducational schools

- Bega Valley Christian School, Bega
- Central Coast Grammar School, Erina
- Copeland College, ACT
- Narrabundah College, ACT
- Penrith Anglican College
- SCECGS Redlands, Sydney
- St Paul's Grammar School, Penrith

To date, no NSW Government or Catholic systemic school offers the programme.

Alan Harper

Alan Harper is Director of Studies at Trinity Grammar School, Sydney. In 26 years of teaching, in Government, Catholic and Independent schools, he has maintained a strong interest in education of the gifted. He is a Fellow and a former NSW President of the Australian College of Educators, and is currently President of the Teachers' Guild of New South Wales.