

Forum Report
“Roundtable Discussion by IBDP Graduates”

1. Introduction

On the 4th of March, 2016, Okayama University held a forum titled: “Roundtable Discussion by International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IBDP) Graduates – Listen to their voices–.” Four IBDP graduates were invited to share their experiences, feelings, opinions, and any suggestions they had concerning universities. The four graduates finished the IB Diploma Program in four different countries; Japan, France, U.S.A., and the Netherlands, over different periods and durations. Therefore, it makes sense that their experiences were quite diverse. This is a summary report of the forum. (I am going to address the four individuals as Ms. J, Ms. F, Ms. U., and Mr. N. in this report.)

Currently, the international Baccalaureate Program is one of the hottest topics in Japan, passionately discussed by teachers, administrators, parents, and politicians, etc. The system of the IB has been studied, lectured, and published upon quite extensively. Colleges, including Okayama University, are accepting IBDP graduates without additional standardized test scores. However, despite these systematic developments, there has not been sufficient occasion to hear from the students, as insiders, concerning their individual experiences and suggestions. Therefore, the purpose of this forum was two-fold: (1) to listen to the IBDP graduates’ voices, and (2) to make networks among the IBDP graduates and hopefully interested parties. As the moderator of the discussion, I put forward the question “What do you think universities need to do to accommodate IB graduates?” near the end of the panel, as I thought this would be the main concern of the participants.

There were 21 audience members, as well as five people from the Admissions Center at Okayama University, which hosted the forum. Of the audience members, 13 came from outside of Okayama University, for instance educators from Osaka University, Taisho University, Nada High School, and even an Okayama Prefectural officer, etc. None of the participants were IB experts, however they were all very curious about the program and its curriculum.

The forum consisted of two parts: Part 1 involved the individual presentations of the participating students, and Part 2 was the panel discussion. Approximately two hours was spent on the individual presentations; this allowed the audience members, as well as the presenters, to learn about the experiences of the four graduates. The remaining one hour was spent on the roundtable discussion involving the four graduates, as well as all members of the floor. During the four presentations, the audience members were asked to note down any questions they had. These

questions were collected during the break between Parts 1 and 2, and then addressed to the respective panelists during the panel discussion.

2. Summary of the presentations and panel discussion

The graduate students repeatedly argued that their experience during the IB was extremely challenging. They studied extremely hard, learning to think critically and analytically, how to question, how to write and present ideas, and most of all, “how to study.” Consequently, they reported having had an easier time in college, and even an easier time in subsequent Masters’ programs. Furthermore, they believed that they were taught how to make appropriate and advantageous life choices by way of critically thinking. Their presentations and the panel discussion are summarized as follows:

2.1 Choice of High Schools

Three of the graduates, excluding Ms. U., attended and took the IBDP at international schools. They chose their high schools primarily based on their parents’ recommendations. In contrast, Ms. U. went to a public high school near her home, which also offered the IBDP (According to data, 50% of IB schools world-wide are public, and the majority of the IB schools in the U.S. are public). Ms. U reported making this decision because she knew that the IB offered excellent art classes and that P.E. was not required, which suited her as she didn’t like sports. Furthermore, her school offered two years of a pre-IB program for a smooth transition.

2.2 Teachers and Classes

All four graduates said that their class sizes were small (3-15 people), and that classes were offered even when there were only 3 students present. This ensured that they had a sufficient variety of classes. Furthermore, in addition to the small classes, Ms. J’s school offered one-on-one tutors for math.

The students reported feeling that the IB teachers enjoyed teaching. In some cases, students reported not having liked the subjects, but still liking the teachers. Ms. F’s ‘Japanese A’ teacher reportedly assigned either a commentary or an essay every week. Ms. F. reported having had no experience writing lengthy papers in Japan; this meant that the writing assignments were extremely hard, but that she learned to love to write as a result of these writing assignments. Ms. J loved her literature classes, however reported that often times the content was so mature/adult that it was difficult for 17 years-old students.

All classes in the IB are inquiry-based. Students are constantly asked “why,” in order to facilitate their critical and analytic thinking. Teachers do not point out mistakes, but rather, guide the students in their exploration of the problem. In the IB it is the “process” of thinking and solving a

problem, not simple answers, that are valued. For example, students reported not being asked to simply memorize math formula, but rather the teachers explained how formula were created and the students were expected to understand. For tests, they were asked to explain the processes they used to solve each problem by way of formula.

2.3 School Subjects

It is sometimes said that the IB teaches school subjects in a way that is excessively “narrow and in depth.” However, the four graduates argued that this is absolutely not the case. They reported that students were exposed to “wide” variety of content, and that students were then able to “deepen” their knowledge concerning topics that they found particularly interesting.

Furthermore, it is sometimes said that IB students lack proficiency in math and science. However, the four graduates maintained that many of their friends were very strong in math and science.

Ms. J reported enjoying BINGATA textile classes, in which the teacher provided excellent handouts. Ms. F reported creating art pieces on the theme of surrealism, and then writing and giving presentations concerning her reasoning behind the art that she had created.

2.4 Social Life

The IB students reported that as they were given so much work to do every day, they were constantly studying. They didn't have time to socialize with other students outside of the IB program.

Their classes were small and they remained together for two years. As a result, they became close friends, and even now after years have passed, they still cherish those friendships. In Ms. U's case, she studied with around 100 students for four years, including two years of pre-IB program.

Ms. F said that she tended to spend time with Japanese and Korean students. However, according to the IB students, nationalities didn't really matter, as they were all studying towards the same goal: to finish the IB DP. Furthermore, Ms. J said that at her international school, students made and participated in groups according to their individual interests, such as IB, sports, OTAKU, and partying.

2.5 DP Exam

All of the students reported that they studied extremely hard for the DP Exam. Ms. J, who went to the IB school in Japan, said that part of her exam (3/4 weeks) had even taken place during Golden Week (end of April to early May).

Ms. F and Mr. N said that they studied past exam questions given to senior students.

2.6 CAS (Creativity, Activities, and Services)

Ms. J said that playing tennis, and doing other activities for CAS, helped her tremendously to cope with the stress she felt from studying (Sports count for the CAS if at an advanced level). Mr. N's CAS experience was rather intensive, participating in a program that involved students (7-12th grade) going to Romania for two weeks, and helping to build houses for the economically underprivileged families, under the supervision of professionals. Ms. U reported working at an animal shelter, believing that being able to experience volunteer work at a younger age and learn its value, was very beneficial for her.

The audience members asked how the students found places for CAS activities, and who authorized the legitimacy of these certain activity as units. Students reported that they were required to make a "CAS note." If they could write "why they chose that activity/service; what they learned; and what contributions they had made," then the activity would qualify as CAS.

2.7 English Language

Ms. J, Ms. F, and Mr. N were non-native speakers of English. As Ms. J's went to international schools before going to the IB school, she didn't have a problem, although she maintained that the level of "IB English" was so high, that even she found it challenging.

Ms. F and Mr. N said that their English was very poor when they moved to the international schools from Japan. When they were asked by the audience members how much they had improved over the years, they humbly answered that they were still not very good. However, one of the audience members, who was an ex-examiner of English B, argued that the two were being too humble. He argued that without high levels of English they would not have survived the IBDP. Another audience member, who is familiar with the IBDP graduates in Okayama University, stated that their TOEIC is usually over 800.

2.8 College Experiences

The graduates reported that the first two years of college classes were much easier than those during the IB. They reported being able to achieve A or A+ grades without much study. They stated that they had learned "how to study" during IBDP, and were trained to be analytical. Therefore, Ms. J for example, said that she was not afraid of subsequent Master's Programs as she already knew how to study, analyze, and write papers.

3. Suggestions for College

During the final moments of the panel discussion, we asked the four graduates to give suggestions on how to accommodate IBDP graduates when they enter universities.

The following is a list of their suggestions:

1. The IBDP is a lot more than just “completing a high school diploma in English.” For college entrance qualifications, the IBDP should not be listed at the same level of “being fluent in English,” similar to being a returnee students who has graduated from high schools abroad. The IB is all about content and a high quality of education, in and beyond English.
2. Count the IBDP units as university credits. Other countries, such as the U.S., count the IBDP credits in a similar manner to AP (Advanced Placement) credits.
3. Certificates for single subjects should be recognized more; the IBDP is a distinguished accomplishment, and not just anyone can pass the exams involved. Even if the final exam score is not high enough to pass, the experience of studying in the IBDP should be recognized to a greater extent.
4. IBDP graduates have learned how to study, how to be analytical and critical, and how to write papers; they are already ready for small group “seminars ㉟.” Therefore they should be allowed to attend ㉟ from their first year (freshman) in college.
5. Create more opportunities and places where students can learn and practice English.
6. Recommend and support students to create “learning communities.” Initiate the making of study groups in places such as the dormitory lounge, etc.
7. IB is all about PBL and “active learning,” with the ultimate goal of becoming well-rounded people. Change the traditional straight-lecture style classes to more interactive-learning style classes.
8. Keep students intellectually stimulated. Otherwise, they begin to find thinking tedious and unrewarding.
9. Open more educational forums, like this one, so that people on campus will be more familiar with the IB.

4. Summary

In summary, when we refer to the IB, we tend to talk about it as if there is only one single model of IB student or IB school. However, there is in fact a great diversity, depending on the country, type of school (international vs. domestic schools, public vs. private schools, etc.), and so on. This diversity was well-demonstrated by the four IBDP graduates. Needless to say, this roundtable discussion was a fruitful meeting for us educators, providing us with access to the insights of the IB graduates’ experiences. Furthermore, the four graduates also maintained that it was a wonderful opportunity for them to reflect upon their own experiences, which they had not realized may have value for others. I sincerely hope that this kind of forum will be held more in the future, so that the voices of these are future graduates can be better heard. Simultaneously, I hope that the connections and networks among the IBDP graduates and interested parties will continue to spread and be strengthened even further in the future.