

IB World

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Bac to the future - how the Diploma Programme might evolve

by Boyd Roberts

Of the three IB programmes, the Diploma Programme is the longest established, dating from well back into the 20th century. Although it continues to serve us well, there seems little doubt that if one were devising now, an international diploma for the 21st century, it would take a rather different form. In considering how the current Diploma Programme might be developed for its 21st century mission, it is important to ensure continuity with the past, while catering for the present, and looking to the future.

Features that are important to retain include the emphasis on the education of the whole person, and the international standing of the programme and qualification.

But there are various ways in which the programme could be developed and improved.

In the Middle Years Programme (MYP), interaction between subjects is stressed. This is not carried forward in the Diploma Programme, and it should be.

All Diploma Programme students study two languages. In part, this is to introduce students to, or retain their contact with, literature and culture of at least two linguistic backgrounds. But it is also for practical reasons of communication. Languages constitute one third of the

teaching subjects for a student. It would be beneficial to recognize and encourage the important practical uses of languages, by promoting and assessing the use of language in other subjects.

Similarly, mathematics is a compulsory component of the Diploma Programme—indeed of all the IB programmes. While mathematics can justify its place within the curriculum as a subject in its own right, it is there, in part, because it is a tool in other subjects and in life in general. Moves to recognize this more overtly in the Diploma Programme would be welcome. Coordination of the mathematics formally taught with the mathematics needed in other subjects would be beneficial. It would also be possible to assess mathematical skills in other subjects.

While there would be some practical difficulties, these initiatives would seem to be intrinsically worthwhile, and would throw further weight behind the IBO's attempt to educate the whole person. They would also encourage—probably require—more extensive interaction between IB Diploma Programme teachers of different subjects, which would seem beneficial, and reflect what is already encouraged in the other IB programmes.

Originally, the Diploma Programme was intended as a university preparatory programme, capable of equipping students for the world's most selective and demanding universities. Experience over the past 30 years or so has demonstrated that it is appropriate for students from quite a broad range of abilities, but it is not suitable for all. Yet, the Diploma Programme is now preceded by two other IBO programmes, which are geared to, or capable of catering for all students. What happens to the students not suited to the Diploma Programme in the last two years of school? Can the IBO develop something to offer to those students not suited to the full Diploma Programme? Is there something, other than single certificates, that could be combined with vocational or national education elements?

The IB Diploma Programme has shown itself capable of international uptake and acceptability, and it is taught in a formidably long list of countries. But I would hope that the IBO would be about more than international uptake, which may in fact lead to educational conservatism. I hope the IBO will cherish and develop its role as an international test ground and trailblazer.

Unlike national systems of education, which are generally imposed, IB programmes are adopted voluntarily. They also stand outside national educational systems, and the inevitable accompanying political concerns. This gives the IBO the opportunity to be innovative and experimental in a way that national systems find more difficult. I would hope that the IBO would take up this opportunity more vehemently in relation to the Diploma Programme than it has done of late. Some schools joined the IBO because it was innovative. It would be a pity if the necessary adaptations to expansion, and taking account of many differing viewpoints resulted in a Programme which was conformist and safe. There would, surely, be the possibility of experimenting with more innovative manifestations of an IB diploma, or more imaginative forms of assessment, with volunteer schools and students. These could run alongside the established model, and serve to trial new ideas. The IBO's international standing means that it should be possible to give universities the necessary reassurances about quality of the programme and qualification.

Since the Diploma Programme was formulated, thinking on international education has itself moved on. For some time, international education was considered to be part and parcel of the context of international schools. It is now recognized that there is, or should be, something intrinsically distinctive about international education, and that it can be practiced in many different contexts, including those of largely monocultural national schools. The IBO says of itself that it is "mission-driven". And its mission is not primarily to produce an international educational system, but "to develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect." As the mission statement goes on to say, it is "To this end the

IBO works with schools, governments and international organizations to develop challenging programmes of international education and rigorous assessment.”

If this is truly the mission of the IBO, then, in the last two years of school, some more overt encouragement should be given to students and schools to develop the “caring” young people, charged with creating a better world. And there should be some appropriate mechanism for recognizing the extent to which this has happened. I believe there is a strong case for the IBO to introduce a recognition programme for the development of “global citizenship”. It is through this desired outcome, rather than through the context or curriculum, that we can recognize an international education. Appropriately evaluated, using qualitative means, and probably elements of peer and school evaluation or assessment, development of global citizenship could be recognized through an award programme. Such an award would accompany—on a voluntary basis—the current, predominantly academic diploma. If offered at various levels, such as bronze, silver and gold, it could also be offered to students not engaged on the whole Diploma Programme, and to younger students, as a means of furthering the IBO’s mission more widely.

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