

# RESEARCH SUMMARY

## *The International Baccalaureate (IB) Career-related Programme (CP): Students' experiences, postsecondary destinations and outcomes*



Summary developed by the IB Research department based on a report

prepared by:

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### Background

This study by the Warwick Institute for Employment Research (IER) explores the experiences, postsecondary destinations and outcomes of International Baccalaureate (IB) Career-related Programme (CP) students. The CP combines academic Diploma Programme (DP) subjects with an accredited career-related study and four core components to offer a pathway to higher education, apprenticeships or employment. It integrates academic and practical learning in a rigorous way and aims to develop the skills, knowledge and competencies required for lifelong learning.

### Research design

All CP students who graduated in 2014 were invited to take part in a survey regarding their experiences during and after their CP studies. Of this group of 339 students, 62 CP alumni from Finland, Germany, the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (USA), Australia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) completed the survey. Most of the survey respondents were from the UK and USA, reflecting the greater number of CP students in these countries. Twenty students also elected to take part in qualitative interviews. Lastly, one employer and eight training and higher education institutions (HEIs) admissions officers were interviewed.

### Findings

#### Student experiences with the CP

##### *Reasons for enrolling in the CP*

The majority of survey respondents indicated that they enrolled in the CP because they were interested in the subjects offered through the programme and because they believed it would give them a competitive edge in further education. The CP is also seen by many as a way to combine both academic and career-related interests. Just under half of the survey participants were recruited to the CP by teachers. Researchers suggest that the newness of the qualification may be a reason for this. The following quotes illustrate four of the most common reasons for students choosing the CP:

- **Interest in subjects offered in the CP:** *"I chose the course because I was interested in international business*

*and management and I was looking for a challenge. I was more interested in international business than just [national business studies]. This course was only available in the CP, not available in other courses or in normal schools".*

- **Perceived advantage for entry to higher education:** *"I wanted to be more competitive for college applications so I could get into a top-notch program".*
- **Advice from teachers:** *"I was approached by [a teacher], he told me about it and he said 'you would be the perfect candidate for it, are you interested?'"*
- **Belief that the CP would advance particular career goals:** *"I decided that I wanted to study engineering when I was in my junior year. I knew what career I wanted to pursue. . . . I took one engineering course and I loved it, so I took the next one, I had lots of fun and I got good grades, and in my junior year I realised that not everyone else around me was getting good grades! I found it easy. So I did the senior design course . . . that was really cool! I joined the robotics team in my junior year. I did physics that year for IB and I did math the next year, that's when I decided to focus on math, science, robotics and engineering".*

- Most students in the study entered the CP at age 16 to gain a secondary school qualification.
- The majority of the students in this sample studied two DP subjects.
- The most frequently chosen standard level subjects were Business and Management and Language B.
- Subjects were selected on the basis of students' interests and to align with their chosen DP subjects and career-related study.
- Just over one-third of the survey respondents (36%) indicated that they knew which career they wanted to pursue and believed that the CP would help them to reach their career goals.
- Eighty-one per cent of survey respondents were satisfied with the career guidance they received from their schools. Students particularly valued visits to universities and employers.

*Box 1. Cross-section of details about the CP alumni who participated in this study.*

## Overall student satisfaction with the CP

In hindsight, 71% of survey participants, and the overwhelming majority of interview respondents, stated that they would choose to undertake the CP again, with interviewees offering comments such as:

*“I found it [the CP] quite amazing and I feel really lucky to have done it”.*

*“For me, the CP was probably the most enjoyable two years that I had in my entire academic history. It brought out the best in me in the way that it gave me a lot of freedom”.*

A similar proportion of survey participants (70%) were satisfied with the reputation of the CP in their schools, their schools' career-related resources (68%) as well as their access to other resources, such as specialized equipment (70%). Many study participants also highlighted the innovative methods used for teaching the CP. For example, one student explained that:

*“The equipment and the teaching . . . was really amazing because basically it was more practical learning than theoretical. So at the first week we got a camera in our hand and in the end of the week we have produced short films, so it was really nice to learn it this way”.*

Interviewees further noted that they had been satisfied with the complexity of the subjects they had studied in the CP, although a small number of respondents suggested that the CP could be more challenging and should better reflect the subject rigour experienced by DP students. Several participants were also concerned about perceived negative competition between DP and CP students in some schools. However, course flexibility and organization, course workload and the content of the CP, were generally not seen as problematic, with nearly two-thirds of survey respondents rating these as good or very good. Major reasons given by students who, in retrospect, would have considered other qualifications included difficulties when attempting to enter their preferred HEI, school-specific issues and changes to individual career plans.

### Perceptions of various components of the CP

In both the survey and interviews, student respondents were asked to share their views about specific aspects of the CP, including the career-related study and the CP's four core components. Alumni interviewees reported that options offered for the career-related study varied substantially among schools, with respondents generally preferring not to be limited to a narrow set of possibilities for their career-related study.

Nonetheless, participants appreciated having work experiences in different sectoral settings, and said these experiences contributed to their communication and job-searching skills. Moreover, through the CP, those who were uncertain of their future career path were able to increase their career-related knowledge and use the programme as a 'test-bed' to try out various career options. Meanwhile, those with existing career plans could use the career focus of the CP as a means to pursue their occupational aspirations.

The reflective project was seen by study participants as a demanding task, but was also rated by the majority of students as a valuable component of the CP. CP alumni felt that the reflective project prepares students for higher education, develops career clarity and allows students to combine personal interests with curricular requirements. Some students, however, said they would have benefited from more advice and support with regard to the reflective project. A number of interviewees described how they connected their reflective projects with their work experiences:

*“It was definitely one of the more challenging things that I did. I did mine on Global engineering, about products designed in America and sent to Africa. . . . It was good to go through it even though it was hard, because it was a different way of researching. It helped kids in my class find an area of engineering we wanted to focus on in the future. It just opened our eyes about what engineering can be”.*

Students similarly outlined a range of benefits from having participated in the community and service, approaches to learning (ATL) and language development aspects of the CP. For example, a survey participant explained that she learned to examine situations from different angles and from the perspectives of different cultures through ATL and language development courses.

*“I think that the world view and the curiosity to look at situations from a different perspective stemming from our work in approaches to learning will definitely be useful in my future studies and experiences, as well as my love for learning a second language, which for me is Spanish. The language development core allowed me to learn more about Spanish and Hispanic culture than what was given in the ab initio course, which focuses more on grammar and vocabulary than culture”.*

## CP postsecondary outcomes

### General skills, knowledge and competencies acquired during the CP

At the time of the study, more than half of all respondents had entered higher education (53%). A further 8% of all survey respondents reported that they were in employment related to their intended career paths and 20% were employed in casual jobs.<sup>1</sup> The remainder were engaged in apprenticeships or career-related training (5%), unemployed (10%) or were doing something else (5%), such as compulsory military service or long-term holidays.<sup>2</sup>

Survey participants were asked to assess the extent to which they had gained a range of important functional skills from the CP, including: language skills, skills for progression into higher education, skills for specific industry-related employ-

<sup>1</sup> It is likely that a proportion of this figure incorporates 'stop-gap' casual work undertaken by students prior to commencing university studies or career-related training/apprenticeships.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that CP student success in applying for career-related training or employment, similar to other applicants, depends on the sectoral labour market. Moreover, in the current recessionary conditions experienced in some countries, it can be hard for many young people to enter their chosen apprenticeships or employment.

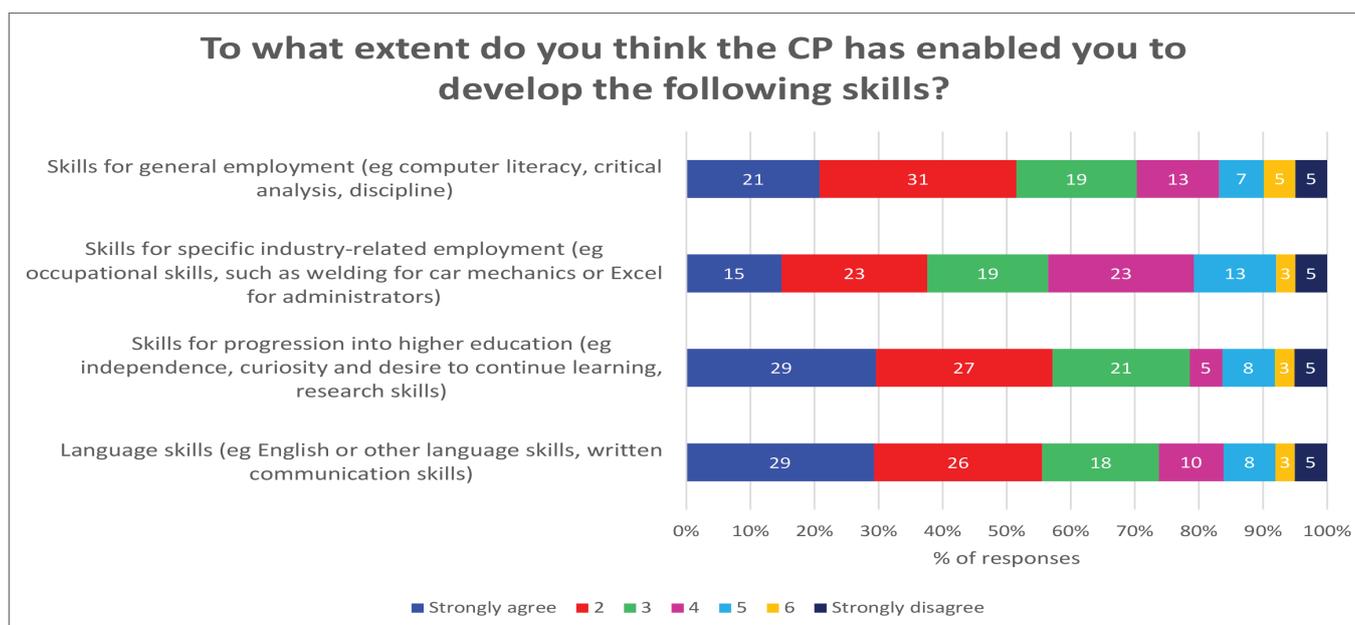


Figure 1. Reported skills gained during the CP.

ment and skills for general employment (Figure 1)<sup>3</sup>. In total, 71% of survey respondents agreed that they had gained useful language skills from the CP. In the student interviews, one interviewee explained how the CP had positioned her well for completing university assignments.

*"In college our longest paper is 1,000 words, many of my classmates complain, oh 1,000 words, but I had to write on-demand essays of 1,000 words! Just having the confidence and the skill to sit down and write those is great. Thanks to it, I'm really comfortable with technical writing so I got the upper hand on technical writing".*

More than three-quarters of survey participants (77%) agreed that they had gained skills for progression into higher education. A smaller proportion of students (57%) felt they had gained specific occupational skills, compared with 71% who agreed they had obtained skills for general employment. An associated skill that was highly valued by one student was using networking to make career-related connections.

*"I want to start building a network here. I learned in the CP that connections do help a lot. It will help me in the long run, regarding internships and other favours that you will need . . . So, I am building up my network here".*

Finally, the CP also impacted positively on students' social competencies. Various students explained how the CP had influenced personal attitudes, such as professionalism and respect, and how they had gained self-confidence, particularly in public speaking. The career-related study had also helped some students to acquire a strong work ethic and to develop collaborative skills.

#### Application to higher education

On the whole, students in this study were able to successfully use the CP to enter higher education. However, while

<sup>3</sup> This classification, however, is not exclusive: many skills which were classified in one category such as language skills can also be classified as skills for progression into higher education or for general employment.

the majority of students indicated that higher education admissions officers had understood the CP and accepted it as a secondary school qualification, many experienced challenges during the application process, such as having to provide additional information about the CP to HEI admissions offices. Several students reported issues associated with the CP certificate not being accepted by HEIs or were disappointed by lower than expected UCAS tariff points in UK HEIs. A small number of students said that they could not enter higher education because their CP certificate was not accepted. More positively, others said that they took advantage of the reputation of the IB brand and/or used interview skills they had acquired during the CP when applying to HEIs.

#### Higher education experiences

More than half of the students in this study enrolled in higher education after completing the CP (53%). Perhaps not surprisingly, the foremost reasons given for entering higher education were related to future employment and career plans. In general, students (75%) felt that the CP had prepared them well for their higher education courses, and 77% of survey respondents regarded DP subjects as especially helpful for higher education. Most students felt that the knowledge gained from DP courses, together with their research skills, had helped them in their current studies, and 83% reported coping well with their studies. The career-related study and the reflective project were perceived as helpful by two-thirds of the CP respondents that were enrolled in higher education. Some students, nevertheless, were more critical and did not feel that they had acquired the necessary writing and research skills to be prepared for higher education.

#### Employment experiences

At the time of the survey, only a small group of students in the study had entered skill appropriate employment after finishing secondary school. The most common reason for accepting their current position was that it offered interesting work. Several of the participants reported that they

had used some of the skills they had gained during their CP studies, such as course-specific skills, communication skills (including English language skills), writing skills and critical thinking skills in their new job.

Ten per cent of the student survey respondents indicated they had experienced unemployment after completing the CP. The main reason given for their current unemployment was the lack of job vacancies.

### CP students' future pathways

Seventy-three per cent of the survey respondents considered their time after completing the CP to be successful, and most of this group said this had to do with participating in the CP. Additionally, more than half of all students were optimistic that the CP would have positive implications for their future.

The ways in which students felt that the CP could contribute to their future pathways included:

- using knowledge, skills and competencies learned
- gaining a head start at higher education
- developing positive attitudes toward lifelong learning
- developing a global perspective
- becoming familiar with work ethic and other professional behaviours.

### Employer and admissions officer views

#### *Advantages and disadvantages of the CP*

The employer and admissions officers that were interviewed appreciated the CP's combination of academic and career-related education and believed that these two elements provided students with a useful set of skills. One of the admissions officers explained: *"The CP gives secondary school students an opportunity to really dive into their interests early-on (much earlier than perhaps those that don't participate and make this decision [in] their first or second year of university)".* The early specialization of CP students, however, was also seen as a disadvantage in a few of the interviews, as students applying for particular courses of study would have acquired specialist skills and knowledge. This could be a disadvantage when competing with students holding broader skills and academic knowledge. Additionally, the lack of awareness or understanding of the CP among admissions officers was noted as a further potential disadvantage for students.

#### *Admission of CP students to higher education*

Only a few of the industry and HEI interviewees in the study had received applications from CP students. Three HEIs in North America had already accepted CP students. None of the respondents said that they had turned down applicants with a CP certificate. Nearly all of the industry and HEI interviewees stated that they would accept CP students, depending on the course of study students had applied for, their DP subjects and whether they had studied these subjects at higher level (HL) or standard level (SL), as well as students' skill sets. In some institutions, specific procedures were undertaken for applicants with an unusual and/or lesser-known secondary school qualification such as the CP.

## Recommendations

Summing up their research findings, the researchers concluded that most CP alumni who took part in the study were content with the education they had received. A selection of useful recommendations provided by the researchers are listed below. For the complete list of recommendations, please see the full report.

- **Recruitment of CP students:** teachers need to be fully informed about the programme and its potential outcomes in order to provide comprehensive advice to students and parents when initially recommending the CP.
- **Communication to potential students:** it is important to continue to improve communication about course requirements, course organization and assessment as well as how the CP generally, and DP subjects specifically, are recognized by HEIs.
- **Reputation of the CP:** it is vital that the CP is seen as similarly challenging as the DP. It should be understood that both the DP and the CP are IB programmes, offering everything that the IB brand stands for.

## References

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This summary was developed by the IB Research department. A copy of the full report is available at <http://www.ibo.org/en/about-the-ib/research/>. For more information on this study or other IB research, please email [research@ibo.org](mailto:research@ibo.org).

To cite the full report, please use the following:

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