

Post-secondary readiness and the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme in Canada

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The Diploma Programme

Offered during grades 11 and 12, the Diploma Programme (DP) is designed to prepare students for success in higher education and other post-secondary pursuits. The DP requires studies in six subject groups and often enables students to earn credit at many leading universities in Canada and around the world. Additionally, the DP includes a core that enhances students' educational experience by challenging them to apply their knowledge and skills.

The DP's six subject groups include:

1. studies in language and literature (e.g. English literature, or language and literature)
2. language acquisition (e.g. Spanish, Mandarin, classical languages)
3. individuals and societies (e.g. history, economics, psychology, business management)
4. sciences (e.g. biology, chemistry, physics, computer science)

5. mathematics (e.g. analysis and approaches, applications and interpretation)
6. the arts (e.g. visual arts, music, film, theatre, dance)

Typically, DP candidates' six subjects include three at higher level (HL; at least 240 hours over two years) and three at standard level (SL; at least 150 hours over one or two years).

The core requirements include:

- a series of student-driven experiences called creativity, activity, service (CAS)
- an extended essay, an academic research paper on a topic of student choice
- a course called theory of knowledge (TOK) that emphasizes critical thinking.

International Baccalaureate (IB) World Schools may allow students to take individual DP courses rather than the entire programme. Assessment of DP subjects includes both work completed during the course and a final exam.

The DP and post-secondary readiness

Recent research provides evidence that the DP curriculum is designed to prepare students for post-secondary success.

Curriculum research

Ecctis (2022) examined coursework in mathematics¹ and sciences (biology, chemistry, and physics) to compare the DP with the Ontario² Secondary School Diploma (OSSD). Overall, DP HL mathematics and science subjects surpass corresponding OSSD subjects in terms of content, while both DP SL and HL subjects are frequently more demanding than those of the OSSD. These findings suggest that DP students in Canada receive an education that prepares them for university success by exceeding the rigor of one of Canada's most recognizable secondary-school frameworks.

Student outcomes research

Researchers at the University of Toronto (UofT) and the University of British Columbia (UBC) compared outcomes of DP students against those of their non-DP peers³ at the same universities (Davies & Guppy, 2022). At both universities, DP graduates:

- enrolled in science and engineering programmes—rather than the arts or other faculties—more frequently than French Immersion (FI) students or students with traditional high school diplomas (OSSD in Toronto or Dogwood Diploma in Vancouver)
- produced higher grades and had lower dropout rates than FI students or students with traditional high school diplomas
- completed their university degrees in a more timely manner than did FI students or students with traditional high school diplomas (Tables 1 and 2).

¹ The courses Ecctis examined included the following: DP: analysis and approaches and applications and interpretation, each at HL and SL. OSSD: Grade 11 functions, university preparation; Grade 11 functions and applications, university/college preparation; Grade 12 advanced functions, university preparation; Grade 12 calculus and vectors, university preparation; Grade 12 mathematics of data management, university preparation.

² The IB selected the province of Ontario for this study because it is home to the most IB World Schools of any Canadian province.

³ UofT researchers examined five entrance cohorts (matriculating in 2008–2012), comparing students who took the DP in Toronto to both students who took French Immersion (FI) in Toronto or the OSSD. UBC researchers examined six entrance cohorts (matriculating in 2012–2017), comparing students who took the DP in Vancouver to both FI students in Vancouver and students who took Vancouver's typical curriculum, the Dogwood Diploma (DW).

Findings from these curricular and outcomes studies indicate that DP students are ready to succeed at Canadian colleges and universities.

		High school programme		
University of Toronto outcome		OSSD	FI	DP
Graduated within 4 years (%)	2008 entrants	62.8	55.6	74.4
	2009 entrants	64.5	75.0	76.2
	2010 entrants	64.4	65.3	78.3
	2011 entrants	62.3	64.3	78.2
	2012 entrants	61.6	74.4	71.2
Graduated within 6 years (%)	2008 entrants	76.5	79.5	82.0
	2009 entrants	78.0	84.5	85.3
	2010 entrants	77.5	79.5	86.3
	2011 entrants	76.4	78.3	85.2
	2012 entrants	75.0	84.3	81.6

Table 1: Four- and six-year graduation rates at the University of Toronto by high school programme

		High school programme		
University of British Columbia outcome		DW	FI	DP
Graduated within 4 years (%)	2013 entrants	65.7	62.5	71.6
	2014 entrants	65.1	63.6	72.0
Graduated within 6 years (%)	2013 entrants	83.0	85.9	87.8

Table 2: Four- and six-year graduation rates at the University of British Columbia by high school programme

References

Davies, S., & Guppy, N. (2022). *Comparing university outcomes of International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme graduates to their peers in Toronto and Vancouver, Canada*. International Baccalaureate Organization.

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