

# Implementation of International Baccalaureate programmes in South Korea

## Research summary

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## Background

Given the expansion of International Baccalaureate (IB) programmes in South Korea, this study aimed to provide an understanding of how IB programmes are being implemented in South Korean schools from the perspectives of key stakeholders, including IB students, teachers, coordinators, principals and parents.

The study had three primary goals: to examine programme implementation in 18 IB World Schools in South Korea, to document the views of key stakeholders on IB programme implementation, and to identify changes in student learning, teaching methods and school organization that stakeholders attribute to IB programme implementation.

## Research design

This mixed-methods study involved four phases.

1. **Literature review:** a tailored review of existing research about the benefits, opportunities, changes, effects, challenges and solutions associated with implementing IB programmes in South Korea.
2. **Qualitative study:** a qualitative study conducted in 9 IB World Schools—3 offering the Primary Years Programme (PYP), 3 offering the Middle Years Programme (MYP) and 3 offering the Diploma Programme (DP)—involving 80 interviews with 181 school members across the schools.
3. **Quantitative study:** a survey administered to 18 IB World Schools, with responses from 2,875 IB students and 320 IB teachers.
4. **Integration of findings:** the integration of key qualitative and quantitative research findings.

## Findings

### Perceived benefits of implementing IB programmes

#### Student perceptions

Students identified the top three benefits of IB programmes as enhancing their **thinking skills**, improving their **self-directed learning skills** and increasing their **participation and engagement in classes**.

They pointed to improvement in thinking skills as an important benefit of an IB education, in particular highlighting research skills as well as creative and critical thinking. Students noted improvement in their self-directed learning through presentations, inquiries and discussion-based learning. Both students and their parents believed that IB programmes allowed students to engage in in-depth learning, more so than the Korean national curriculum.

Additionally, students valued the **real-life applicability of their learning** in IB programmes as well as increased global citizenship awareness. They also emphasized the development of **positive peer relationships** through collaborative learning activities and the **enjoyment of a happy school life**.

#### Teacher perceptions

Teachers identified **professional development** as the most important benefit of implementing IB programmes. Among the various types of professional development, they found school-based **professional learning communities (PLCs)** to be the most beneficial, followed by IB-provided training, training at other schools and training from the local education office. The data revealed that most teachers felt the professional development gained from implementing IB programmes effectively enhanced their professional practices, such as assessment skills. Beyond professional development, teachers also valued the **access to innovative and diverse educational tools** that the IB provides.

### Perceived challenges of implementing IB programmes

#### Student perceptions

Students identified the top three challenges of participating in IB programmes as follows: **broad subject scope**, **personality suitability required for an IB education** and **excessive assignments**. “Broad subject scope” and “excessive assignments” respectively refer to the extensive range of topics covered and the perceived challenging nature of IB programmes, including the volume and variety of assignments. With regard to “personality suitability required for an IB education”, students generally understood an IB education to be more inquiry-based, student-led and project-based, involving diverse learning activities and assessments. Some students expressed concerns about a perceived mismatch between their personal characteristics and the IB approach to education, as they were accustomed to more traditional learning methods.



Students also highlighted the challenges of **continuation in IB education** and **university admission** due to differences in the IB curriculum framework and the national curriculum. They pointed to a potential misalignment, particularly between the DP and South Korea's university admission system, which relies heavily on the national examination for university admission, the College Scholastic Ability Test.

Teachers and parents suggested a more nuanced story. While some had concerns that an IB education could be a disadvantage in the Korean university admissions process, others believed IB programmes could be advantageous for non-standardized university admission tracks, which focus on performance assessments or comprehensive student records.

### Teacher perceptions

The most significant challenges perceived by teachers included the **burden of dual assessments** (i.e. assessments required by IB programmes and the national curriculum) and the **high cost of implementing IB programmes**. Other notable challenges included conducting and marking qualitative criteria-based assessments and conducting collaborative assessments with other teachers. Teachers also expressed concerns about the challenges of implementing IB programmes within the national education system and the perceived disadvantages of IB students for university admission to Korean universities.

## Perceived changes through the implementation of IB programmes

### Student perceptions

The researchers examined perceived changes in students' learning attributes, skills and school life since starting their IB programme. Overall, IB students

reported a moderate to high level of perceived changes. For example, students highlighted improvements in **classes and school life** and **competencies** such as critical thinking and self-directed learning. However, MYP students reported lower satisfaction than their PYP and DP peers, likely related to the theme of "excessive assignments".

### Teacher perceptions

The researchers explored teachers' level of agreement with statements about the perceived changes brought by IB programmes, using a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree).

Teachers generally viewed the changes in their schools positively, with an average agreement score of 5.10. This suggests that the implementation of IB programmes is seen as having a **substantially positive impact on various aspects of the school environment and teachers' practices**.

The highest levels of agreement were observed for statements related to **teachers' professionalism and teaching practices**, both with a mean score of 5.34, indicating that teachers perceive IB programme implementation as having greatly enhanced professional standards and instructional methods. Further, the development of **PLCs** (5.30) and the **relationship between teachers and students** (5.29) were highly rated, suggesting a positive shift in collaboration and interaction within the school environment. Teachers also reported strong agreement that their **expertise in assessment** (5.26) had improved.

## Perceptions of profiled features of IB programme implementation

Overall, teachers showed positive perceptions of the following areas in relation to the implementation of IB programmes in their school, on a scale from 0 (strongly disagree) to 1 (strongly agree).<sup>1</sup>

- Supporting students' balanced growth and development: PYP (0.92), MYP (0.90), DP (0.88)

<sup>1</sup> Note. Since each area was measured on a different scale (4 to 6-point Likert scale), the scores were standardized by dividing each mean by the highest possible score for that area. This adjustment allowed for cross-category comparisons among the different aspects of IB programme implementation.

- Enhanced student competences: PYP (0.87), MYP (0.84), DP (0.91)
- Supporting students' self-directed learning: PYP (0.88), MYP (0.86), and DP (0.83)
- School climate and culture: PYP (0.85), MYP (0.82), and DP (0.80)
- Pedagogical autonomy: PYP (0.83), MYP (0.78), and DP (0.78)
- Using various assessments: PYP (0.78), MYP (0.76), and DP (0.73)

Teachers expressed a moderate level of **job satisfaction** at their school. Although teachers reported a sense of professional growth and mastery through the

implementation of IB programmes, this implementation has significantly increased their workload, resulting in lower job satisfaction. Similarly, while many teachers felt a great sense of fulfilment as they saw the improvement in the quality of their teaching and the progress of their students, they also felt they did not have enough time to provide sufficient feedback to students due to their workload.

Additionally, teachers reported experiencing **work-related stress** from factors like lesson preparation, grading and administrative tasks, teaching load, and responsibility for student achievement, all of which can contribute to teacher burnout.

## Conclusion

This study provides positive empirical evidence that IB programmes can enhance student competencies and wellbeing, teacher professionalism and expertise, and parental satisfaction. The findings indicate that the implementation of IB programmes has brought notable benefits to the 18 public schools included in this study.

For students, IB programmes have led to noticeable improvements in their school experience and relationships with peers and teachers. Students reported enhanced life skills, including thinking skills, communication, global citizenship and self-directed learning. These findings, echoed by teachers and parents, highlight the positive impact on student development.

For teachers, IB programmes have been instrumental in enhancing their expertise. Teachers reported feelings of growth, mastery and fulfilment, largely due to participating in professional development and school-based PLCs and observing positive changes in students.

However, challenges like heavy teacher workload and potential burnout could negatively impact the sustainability of IB programmes. The researchers recommend policy support to reduce administrative burdens and promote teacher wellbeing, while also suggesting that PLCs could focus more on sharing resources and lesson materials and collaborating on lesson planning. Addressing misalignments between the national university entrance examination and IB programmes, as well as cost and funding issues, will be crucial for the sustainability and success of IB programmes.

Despite these challenges, the study indicates that IB programmes have important benefits for students, teachers and school communities. Attending to the identified issues will be essential for sustaining and expanding the benefits of IB programmes in South Korea in the future. With appropriate policy support and thoughtful adjustments, IB programmes can continue to provide high-quality education that prepares students for a globalized world.

A copy of the full report is available at: [www.ibo.org/en/research/](http://www.ibo.org/en/research/). For more information on this study or other IB research, please email [research@ibo.org](mailto:research@ibo.org).

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