

Backgrounds and Characteristics of IB Students Enrolled at Okayama University: A 7-year Experience

Sabina MAHMOOD

Abstract

The number of International Baccalaureate (IB) students applying to Japanese Universities is increasing. Okayama University is a Super Global Japanese National University which started IB admissions in 2012, and presently has 50 IB students in 11 faculties and 1 special program, in addition to 4 IB graduates. The IB journey began in 2012, and over a period of 7 years, Okayama University has taken multiple approaches to become IB student-friendly, by revising the IB admission policies as per IB student requirements; training faculty on IB education; exploring the differences in IB education and Japanese High School education; listening to IB student voices and familiarizing faculty about IB student backgrounds and characteristics. By providing IB student support, educating faculty and doing extensive IB research, Okayama University has established itself as a pioneer of IB admissions among the IB Organization, prospective IB students and parents, IB college counselors and other National Universities in Japan.

The basis of IB education:

Established in 1968, the IB Diploma Program (DP), was the first program offered by the IB and is taught to students aged 16-19 years of age. The DP was established to provide students with a balanced education, facilitate geographic and cultural mobility and promote international understanding (Hill and Saxton, 2014). As of September 2019, there are 3,421 schools offering the DP, in 157 different countries worldwide. The DP is highly recognized by the world's leading universities (Conley, 2014). DP students apply to more than 3,300 universities each year, in almost 90 countries. The DP curriculum is made up of six subject groups and the DP core, comprising of the extended essay, theory of knowledge (TOK) and creativity, activity, service (CAS). Through the DP core, students reflect on the nature of knowledge, complete independent research and undertake a project that involves community service. Students choose courses from 6 subject groups:

1. Studies in language and literature

2. Language acquisition
3. Individuals and societies
4. Experimental sciences
5. Mathematics
6. The arts

Students pursuing the IB diploma must take six subjects: one each from Groups (1-5) and either one from Group 6 or a substitute from one of the other groups. Students take some subjects at higher level (HL), comprising 240 teaching hours and some subjects at standard level (SL), comprising 150 teaching hours. Each student takes at least 3 (but not more than 4) subjects at HL, and the remaining at SL. The IB diploma is awarded to students who receive a minimum score of 24 points, and complete the core components. Scores are based on grades of 1 to 7 for each of the 6 subjects, for a total of 42 points, and up to 3 additional points for the core components. The highest total available for a DP student is 45 points. Students who do not complete the core components receive the “IB Certificate” which certifies completion of 12 years of education and also makes students eligible for University Admission.

History of IB admissions at Okayama University

Okayama University started IB admissions in 2012 with 4 out of 11 faculties namely, Science, Health Science, Engineering, Agriculture, and the Matching program (MP) course, accepting IB Diploma graduates, initially. In 2014, Okayama University was selected to receive funding from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, as part of the “Acceleration Program for University Education Rebuilding Program (AP Program), for a period of 5 years, extending to 6 years. By 2015, all 11 faculties and the MP course were open to IB Diploma graduates (Ueda, 2015, Yonezawa, 2015, Yamamoto, 2017). In 2017 April, the MP course ended and from October 2017, the special program: Discovery Program for Global Learners, began accepting IB students not only with the IB Diploma, but also students with the IB certificate. In accordance with University standards worldwide, Okayama University decided to recognize the IB diploma and exempt IB students from taking the national university entrance exam (also known as the Center Test) or any other additional written tests.

IB Diploma application periods at Okayama University (for 11 faculties)

Okayama University has two application periods per year for IB Diploma students

seeking admission into the 11 faculties. The first application period is in August, for IB students taking the IB Diploma exam in May and graduating in July, and the other application period is in October, for IB students taking the IB exam in November, but who are eligible to apply with predicted scores, in October. Following the final result publication in January, eligible students are informed about their acceptance. While august applications are limited to certain faculties, all 11 faculties accept applications in October. Besides the 6-year medical school, which requires a minimum diploma score of 39 out of the total 45 for application, IB Diploma students can apply to all other faculties with a minimum diploma score of 24 out of 45. Other application requirements based on faculty are stated in the application guide which is revised annually and published in early summer.

Difference between IB education and Japanese High School education (JHE)

The IB diploma (IBDP) is a 2-year course preparing students for admission into Universities worldwide, while the JHE is a 3-year course preparing students for admission into Japanese Universities. The IBDP course focuses on communication and research skills, promoting deeper learning of specific subjects in addition to student engagement, in comparison to the JHE, which is mainly focused on deeper learning of specific subjects necessary to pass the University Entrance exam. The IBDP takes a more holistic approach which is inquiry-based, where students acquire knowledge by asking questions and considering multiple viewpoints. Class sizes are usually small, ranging from 1 student to a maximum of 15 students to one teacher, in comparison to Japanese high school classes with 40 students to one teacher. IBDP focuses on developing critical and creative thinkers who can contribute to both local and global contexts. In JHE, the method of learning is of transmission type, lecture oriented, where mostly the teacher speaks and students listen, study from text books and take notes. Questions are asked mostly by the teacher and students reflect either by answering to questions asked by the teacher or passively through reports or surveys. There is little opportunity for discussions on a regular basis.

IB student backgrounds

Among the 50 IB students who are presently enrolled at Okayama University, almost 50% are from IB schools abroad, such as International Schools in Germany, UK, Italy, Netherlands, Switzerland, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand and Dubai. The remaining 50 % are either from International schools in Japan or Frist Articles schools with IB recognition, where Japanese high school students take the IB diploma in the final two

years of their 3 year high school course. The areas in Japan where IB students came from include, Tokyo, Kanagawa, Shizuoka, Gunma, Nagano, Aichi, Kyoto, Osaka, Hiroshima, Fukuoka and Okinawa. All IB students enrolled in the 11 faculties, are Japanese Nationals, having a Japanese Language Proficiency equivalent to native level Japanese, a full IB Diploma and a diploma score ranging from 24 to 42, out of the total score of 45. IB students belonging to the special program have either a full Diploma or an IB certificate. Multilingualism is a very common trait among all IB students studying at Okayama University.

Why IB students choose Okayama University

Although the IB diploma is recognized as equivalent to the entrance requirement for college admissions worldwide, most Japanese Universities require IB diploma graduates to take the National Center test, in addition to other tests for admission. In accordance with global standards, Okayama University was the first National University in Japan, to recognize the IB diploma and exempt IB students from taking the National Center test or any other tests, for admission. Based on feedback from IB students, parents and IB school college counsellors, this seems to be one of the biggest reasons for choosing Okayama University. Other additional reasons include:

1. Easy to understand admission policies.
2. Clear cut subject and grade requirements for each faculty.
3. Admissions based on document screening only (for most faculties),
4. Two application periods in August and October.
5. Recommendations by senior IB students and by IB college counsellors
6. Positive impression of Okayama University during school visits by Okayama University faculty
7. Familiarity through consistent participation of Okayama University in college fairs.
8. National university with very low tuition fees and a global image
9. Many study abroad opportunities with no extra tuition fees
10. Overall reasonable cost of living in Okayama city and huge campus environment.

IB student perspectives about academic and campus life at Okayama University

Within 4 weeks of admission, all IB students enrolled in the 11 faculties, have a one-on-one interview with the IB student advisor and are then followed up through direct interaction or surveys. All new IB students are introduced to the Okayama University IB student LINE group, which students can join of their own will (Mahmood

et al, 2016; Mahmood et al 2018). By being connected to the IB advisor through an easily accessible social networking platform, both IB students and the IB advisor have an opportunity to interact, exchange information regarding academic and campus life, and discuss various issues. Some impressions of IB students regarding academic and campus life at Okayama University are summarized below.

1. IB is interpreted as “fluent in English”, which is a strong image.
2. The proactive attitude of IB students gather attention.
3. There are fewer opportunities for active discussions among students and teachers.
4. The number of classes conducted in English are few.
5. Some are worried about the decline in their English skills.
6. Concentrating in big classrooms is sometimes difficult.
7. It takes about 6 months to adapt to the new environment.
8. It feels good when IB student experiences encourage other students to study abroad.
9. Studying at a national university has brought some IB students closer to their roots.
10. Getting admission at a national university with an IB Diploma, without taking the center test, is very surprising for Japanese high school graduates.

Impressions of Faculty regarding IB students

Most Faculty at Okayama University are eager to take IB students. Presently IB students are enrolled in 7 out of 11 faculties and the special program (Mahmood et al, 2017). A one-on-one interview survey was conducted among Professors presently hosting IB students. Their impressions of IB students are summarized below.

1. They are bright, cheerful and optimistic.
2. They are all fluent in English.
3. They have very good communication and presentation skills.
4. They are good team players.
5. They are empathetic towards others.
6. They like taking new challenges.
7. They are usually good candidates for study abroad programs.
8. Their presence encourages other students to learn English and go abroad
9. Their discussion skills are better than their memorization skills.
10. They have a research mind and have good critical thinking skills.

Actions taken by Okayama University in 7 years to promote IB Admissions

1. Designating an IB student advisor and sharing IB student experiences with other faculty members on a regular basis.

2. Connecting with IB students regularly through a social networking platform.
3. Listening and learning from the experiences of IB student voices.
4. Networking with the IB head office, college counselors, prospective students and parents on a regular basis.
5. Active participation in major college fairs annually, to cater to the direct inquires of IB students and familiarizing Okayama University with IB students on a large scale.

Conclusion

IB students with their diverse backgrounds and critical thinking skills, have the ability to promote international mindedness. Their educational experiences and multi-lingual skills can encourage other students to take up new challenges internationally (Ninomiya, 2009; Sanders, 2018). Their open mindedness allows them to think outside their comfort zones and reach for newer horizons. Increasing the number of IB student admissions at Okayama University will not only internationalize the academic environment but create opportunities for local students to think at the global level for overall sustainability.

References:

1. Conley: International Baccalaureate Diploma Program: Examining College Readiness. *The Education Policy Improvement Center*, 2014.
2. Hill and Saxton: The International Baccalaureate (IB) Program: An International gateway to higher education and beyond. *Higher Learning Research Communications*. 4(3): 42-52, 2014.
3. Mahmood S, Tanaka K, Satake K, Tahara M. The International Baccalaureate Diploma Student Perspective on Student Life at Okayama University. *Journal of Multidisciplinary Academic Research*, 4(3): 85-89, 2016.
4. Mahmood S, Satake K, Iizuka M, Tanaka K, Ueda I, Tahara M. Viewpoints of Academic Advisors on International Baccalaureate Diploma Students Studying at Okayama University, *Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, 5(1): 72-76, , 2017.
5. Mahmood S, Satake K, Iizuka M, Tanaka K, Ueda I, Ishii I, Tahara M. Creating an International Baccalaureate Student-friendly National University, *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal*, 15(11): 354-360, 2018.
6. Ninomiya: The past, present and future of internationalization in Japan. *Journal of studies in International Education*. 13(2): 117-124, 2009.
7. Ueda: Okayama University International Baccalaureate entrance examination design- Present and Future (In Japanese). *Daigaku Nyushi Kenkyu Journal*, 26, 147-154, 2015.
8. Sanders: Expanding the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program in Japan: The

role of University Admission Reforms. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 17(1) 17-32, 2018.

9. Yamamoto: Diversifying admissions through top-down entrance examination reform in elite Japanese Universities: What is happening on the ground? In Mountford-Zindars and Harrison NE (Eds.). *Access to Higher Education: Theoretical Perspectives and Contemporary Challenges* (p. 216-231). Oxford: Routledge, 2017.

10. Yonezawa: Transformation of University governance through internationalization: Challenges for top universities and government policies in Japan. *Higher Education*, 70 (2): 173-186, 2015.