



# To IB or not to IB – that is the Year 12 question

**Annie Facchinetti**, on the growing interest in an internationally-focused qualification

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**Y**ear 12 is an interesting stage in a young person's life, both full of possibility and relentlessly focused on a single outcome. Teenagers often feel pressured to choose a pathway at a time when they have neither the experience nor the knowledge to make a truly informed decision. While many students in traditional Year 12 courses across the country struggle with whether to follow their strengths to maximise their marks, or to keep their options open by including subjects from a diversity of disciplines, those taking the International Baccalaureate Diploma are undertaking a very different journey.

The International Baccalaureate (IB) was founded in Switzerland in 1968 with the intention of providing a program that would prepare "internationally mobile" students for university (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2005–12). Over the years, the course has been expanded into four separate programs – a primary program, a middle years program, a Diploma program and a Career-related Certificate – with various combinations being offered in 3473 schools across 144 countries. Increasing numbers of Australian students are choosing the IB Diploma in preference to state and territory Year 12 qualifications; currently there are 148 IB schools in Australia, 62 of which offer the Diploma program.

Tintern Schools first introduced the IB Diploma in 1992. According to course Coordinator Nola Brotchie, Tintern has always nurtured weaker students through its strong education support system. The IB program was launched as a means to cater to a broader range of needs within the school. The requirements of the Diploma are common around the world, making it an internationally recognised qualification. Brotchie explains that Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) students, for example, would have to sit the SATs to gain university entrance in the US, whereas tertiary institutions understand and therefore accept IB Diploma results.

## **High expectations**

The expectations on IB students are high. Subjects are organised into six groups: Studies in Language and Literature; Language Acquisition; Individuals and Societies; Experimental Sciences; Mathematics and Computer Science, and The Arts. Students must study one subject from each of the first five groups in both Years 11 and 12, plus an additional subject either from The arts, or from one of the other groups, making six subjects in total. At least three subjects must be taken at "higher level". The idea is that students experience a truly rounded education.

To this end, IB Diploma candidates must also complete a seventh academic subject called Theory of Knowledge (TOK). The TOK course focuses on questions fundamental to the concept of learning such as “What counts as knowledge?” and “Who owns knowledge?” Students explore the four ways of knowing within the context of their own culture and from a global perspective, and delve into philosophical issues that build an understanding of the dynamic nature of knowledge. Brotchie admits that the subject can be challenging and confronting, with classes typically featuring debates with ideas flying and different viewpoints being expressed, but she asserts that, “every student should do it.” TOK represents a unifying element in what is otherwise a very diverse program of study and as the students’ insight deepens, Brotchie says they often have “TOK moments” when they start to see the connections between different areas.

The critical thinking skills learned during TOK sessions are especially useful for the extended essay component of the IB Diploma program. Each student must research and write a 4000-word essay on a topic of interest, usually linked to one of their IB subjects. The only limitation on subject matter choice is that there must be a member of staff with sufficient expertise in the area to oversee each student’s work. Looking through her pile of recent submissions, Brotchie reels off an impressive array of titles from essays submitted by Tintern Schools students, covering everything from sleep deprivation, to the effect of autism on siblings, to life under the Khmer Rouge including material from interviews conducted in Cambodia. The fact that students must complete this task while simultaneously keeping up with other subject demands means that time management is one of the most critical abilities for an IB student.

### **Creativity, action, service**

Young people who choose to tackle the IB Diploma are also expected to take an active part in extra curricular activities. Described as a “refreshing counterbalance to academic studies” (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2005–12), the Creativity, Action, Service component of the program, or CAS as it is commonly known, requires students to spend around three hours a week for the duration of the two-year course pursuing a range of activities that round out their experience.

According to Brotchie, that equates to about 50 hours in each of the three CAS areas. The Creativity element encompasses involvement in the arts or in other activities that require creative thinking while the Action element promotes a healthy lifestyle through participation in team or individual sports and in expeditions or special projects. The Service element builds a social conscience through engaging students in community or social service activities that both contribute to the community and enhance the students’ own learning and development.



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Tintern Schools has appointed a CAS Coordinator to monitor students’ progress towards their CAS commitments. To meet the requirement, students need to identify their goals for each activity, log their contributions via an online system that was developed by previous IB candidates and reflect on how they went.

Brotchie explains that documenting and providing evidence of CAS involvement is vital. For instance, students may email their supervisor or coach to obtain feedback on their goals as proof of their achievement and participation. Students generally choose pursuits that fit in with their lifestyles and interests. The program rules do not allow religious activities, so typical areas that Tintern students have become involved in are reading with primary students at the school, recording life stories from residents at an old people’s home, teaching English to Sudanese students or helping out in a warehouse for the homeless.

### **Motivated students**

With so many different requirements to manage, motivation tends to be one of the hallmarks of successful IB students. The process to select IB students at Tintern Schools is designed to give students a realistic understanding of the course expectations. Brotchie begins with an information session in April for Year 10 students and their parents. Past and present students share their experiences and the Diploma structure is clearly explained. This is followed up by a Year 10 assembly on the topic. By third term, students need to decide if they want to pursue the IB path, and a subject showcase comparing VCE and IB subjects is held to facilitate this.

Brotchie says that it is rare that a student is not accepted into the program. If teachers believe that a student may not be suitable, the school offers subject counselling to help the candidate identify the reason for wanting to participate in the IB, and to decide whether it

is the right choice. This year 25 students have taken on the Diploma course, around 20 per cent of the schools' total Year 12 cohort.

Brotchie is effusive about the benefits of the IB program. "They are educated as a whole person, not just a receptor of maths, history, etc.," she says. The essence of this ideal is captured in the opening sentence of the International Baccalaureate Organization's mission statement: "The International Baccalaureate aims to develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect." (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2005–12).

### Pre-university equivalent

The rigour of the IB Diploma effectively makes it a pre-university course and Brotchie believes that most IB students find the transition to university easier because they are used to managing deadlines and being proactive in seeking help. In fact, many universities in Australia and around the world look favourably upon students who have completed an IB Diploma, with some even offering bonus points, credit or advanced placement to IB students. The University of New England, for example, allows IB Diploma students to apply for its Early Entry program based on teacher recommendation, while the Australian Catholic University offers up to 10 bonus points toward a student's entry score through its accessACU initiative.

The IB course certainly keeps students' options open by covering the spectrum of subjects, but all of Tintern Schools' IB graduates move on to tertiary education. According to Brotchie, many take science courses at Melbourne University, ending up as doctors or vets. A lot also go into law, with several becoming what Brotchie describes as "high flyers with a social conscience", working for organisations such as the Red Cross or even on a

war crimes tribunal in Phnom Penh. It is a fitting outcome for a course that prides itself on being truly global.

Just as IB students have higher expectations placed upon them, the demands on IB teachers can also be greater. There are, however, some benefits for educators. "As a VCE teacher you are more hamstrung by the constraints of the assessment process," Brotchie says.

She is also adamant that although the work might be harder, it is definitely more rewarding. Students tend to form a tightly knit group with their IB classmates, a phenomenon which extends to the subject teachers. "It can be emotional at the end," Brotchie explains. "Students respect the teacher as a person; teachers learn as much as the students." The teacher-student bond is very evident in Brotchie's office, which is adorned with a hand-made banner from students and strewn with keepsakes such as a photo mug of this year's class, all gifts from her charges.

### Challenges

For all its rewards, the demands of the IB Diploma course mean that it is not without its challenges. Very few Tintern Schools students do not make it successfully through the IB, but Brotchie admits that nearly all of them "hit the wall" at some point. Most commonly, the difficulties relate to organisation, as the students struggle to meet their subject deadlines and keep up with the other course requirements. They do, however, have the benefit of facing their problems in a supportive environment, as opposed to the majority of students who only encounter these difficulties for the first time at university.

Relationship issues or illness can also hamper students' IB journeys, but Brotchie says that the close connections between students and teaching staff allow for a realistic assessment of each situation that leads to the negotiation of suitable

solutions such as a redistribution of deadlines. In fact, it is not necessarily the brightest students who flourish most under the IB, but those who learn effective time management skills from an early stage. "It's a misconception that you have to be independent [to succeed at the IB]," Brotchie explains. "You can learn the skill as part of the program. Students who are curious about learning and want to take it further do the best."

### International marking

The international nature of the IB Diploma course – students' work, for example, is routinely sent to examiners in other IB countries for marking – gives students an entre into a world where technology is breaking down borders, igniting a passion for internationalism that many pursue as a career path.

The IB mission states that the programs "encourage students across the world to become active, compassionate and lifelong learners who understand that other people, with their differences, can also be right." It is little wonder then that since 2000, participation in the IB Diploma in the Asia-Pacific region has grown from 79 programs in 2000 to 345 in 2011.

In a world where information is instantly accessible online, the International Baccalaureate Diploma offers an alternative that seems to prepare young people effectively not only for further study, but also to be creative and adaptable, qualities that are increasingly sought after by employers. Although it's not for everyone, for students who are motivated and willing to look beyond the walls of the school, the IB Diploma is an inspiring option.

### Further reading

International Baccalaureate Foundation  
Accessed 3 November 2012 from:  
<http://www.ibo.org>

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