

BRIDGING WORLDS: ACADEMIC ADVISORS' PERSPECTIVES ON GUIDING IB DIPLOMA STUDENTS AT OKAYAMA UNIVERSITY

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Abstract: The landscape of higher education in Japan is undergoing significant transformations driven by the forces of globalization and educational reform. This paper delves into the active reforms aimed at internationalizing the educational environment and evolving Japanese Universities into globally accessible institutions. A pivotal aspect of this transformation involves increasing international student enrollment and welcoming students from diverse educational backgrounds. This study explores the integration of the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO), a Geneva-based non-profit organization established in 1968, into Japanese higher education reform efforts. The IBO, renowned for its internationally recognized pre-college curriculum, is instrumental in shaping education to nurture global citizens with leadership skills.

The International Baccalaureate (IB) program, comprising the Primary Years Program (PYP), Middle Years Program (MYP), Diploma Program (DP), and the IB Career-related Program (CP), emphasizes international mindedness. The DP, in particular, prepares high school students for postsecondary education, equipping them with knowledge and skills essential for success at the university level while fostering nonacademic skills related to workload and time management. Recognizing the IBDP as equivalent to Japanese high school graduation in 1979, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) paved the way for the integration of IB into the national education system.

The Super Global University (SGU) project initiated by MEXT in 2014 aimed at elevating select Japanese universities to global standards. Okayama University, chosen under type B of the SGU project, aspired to become a model global university by fostering innovation and collaboration with top global institutions. Notably, Okayama University took a pioneering step by implementing an IBDP admission policy, exempting IB students from the National University Entrance Examination. Since 2012, IB student enrollment has expanded across all faculties at Okayama University, with specific admission criteria set for various courses.

As of April 2017, Okayama University has welcomed IB students from both Japanese and international IB schools, signaling the successful integration of the IBO framework into the fabric of Japanese higher education, and presenting a potential model for other universities aiming for global competitiveness.

Keywords: International Baccalaureate, Higher Education Reform, Globalization, Super Global University, Okayama University

Introduction

In recent years, globalization and higher education reform is underway in Japan. As part of an active reform to internationalize the educational environment and transform Japanese Universities into effective, integrated

international Universities, it is essential to become universally accessible, by increasing international student enrollment and accepting students from various educational backgrounds. The International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) is a non-profit organization established in Geneva, Switzerland in 1968, which introduced an internationally recognized pre-college curriculum to reform education and nurture global citizens with leadership skills¹⁻². Presently, the IB program consists of the “Primary Years Program” (PYP), for students aged 3-12, years, the “Middle Years Program” (MYP), for students aged 11-16 years, the “Diploma Program” (DP) and the IB Career-related Program (CP), for high school students aged 16-19 years. The IB intends to provide an education emphasizing international mindedness. The DP prepares students for postsecondary education and provides students with the knowledge and skills required for success at university, and develop nonacademic skills related to workload and time management. In addition to 6 subject groups, the DP core component consists of the extended essay (EE), theory of knowledge (TOK), and creativity-action-service (CAS), which motivates and engages students to develop additional, non-scholastic real life skills. In 1979, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), officially recognized the IBDP equivalent to Japanese high school graduation³⁻⁴. In 2014, MEXT, introduced the Super Global University (SGU) project and selected 37 top Universities, that would receive either 1 of the 2 types of financial aids, A and B, for the reformation of their present university educational system in compliance with global trends⁵. Okayama University was selected under type B, with the aim of developing into a role model global university, stimulating cooperation with top world universities and fostering innovative approaches, for global competitiveness. Okayama University was the first national university in Japan, to establish the IBDP admission policy in which, IB students were not required to take the National University Entrance Examination or any other written exams, for admission into the undergraduate course. In 2012, IB student enrollment began in 4 faculties and 1 special course, and from 2015, all 11 faculties and the special course⁶ welcomed IB students. With the exception of the 6 year medical course, which requires a minimum IBDP score of 39 for application, all faculties including the special course require a minimum IBDP score of 24 to apply, in addition to the language subject, Japanese A and a minimum age of 18 years at the time of enrollment. As of April 2017, 20 IBDP students from 6 IB schools in Japan and 6 IB schools abroad, have enrolled at Okayama University.

In order to make Okayama University more IB friendly, the AC, has set up an IB student support system with IB student advisors, to help IB students adjust to academic and campus life and meet IB student needs. In 2016, a survey on IB students was published⁷, which looked into the views and perspectives of IB students studying at Okayama University. The feedback obtained from the students, helped student advisors to understand IB student perceptions, their hurdles and their expectations. The present survey including AAs, is part of an ongoing effort by Okayama University AC, towards improving the overall university system and efficiently cater to the needs of all IB students.

METHOD OF SURVEY

Members of the Okayama University AC, actively involved in IB admissions and IB student support, constructed a questionnaire for faculty AAs where IB students are presently enrolled. Each of the 10 questions in the questionnaire, was intended to give AAs an opportunity to share their views experiences with IB students studying at their respective departments, for a period of at least one year from the time of enrollment. The contents of the questionnaire covered the following areas;

- a) Expectations of IB students before enrollment

- b) Changes in expectations over time
- c) Impressive aspects of IB students
- d) Disappointments
- e) Impressions of non-IB students toward IB students
- f) IB student performance
- g) Familiarity of other faculty members with the IB education system
- h) Need for departmental briefing on IB education and IB students prior to enrollment
- i) Need for assistance from AC IB student Advisors regarding IB students
- j) Suggestions to improve IB admissions and help IB students adapt smoothly to academic and campus life

Following approval from all members at the AC, the questionnaire was used in the survey. It was also decided to keep the names and affiliations of AAs, anonymous. After receiving permission from each AA, a total of 11 AAs, who had at least 1 year experience with IB students, were interviewed over a period of 3 months, extending from October 2016 to January 2017. Each interview was conducted by 2 AC members at the respective offices of the AAs, and lasted 30 minutes to 1 hour. All AAs consented to this survey and willingly answered every question in the questionnaire. No voice recordings were made.

RESULTS OF SURVEY

Expectations of IB students prior to enrollment

More than 50% of AAs had high expectations of IB students and hoped IB students, based on their educational background, would be positive, interactive and open minded. More than 25% of AAs had little or no knowledge about the IB education system as a whole, except that it was globally recognized. A little less than 20% of AAs, were concerned about the big difference between the Japanese High School Education (JHE) and the IBDP educational approach. Some expressed confusion regarding accepting IBDP students without any entrance exams, while others wondered whether a high IBDP score correlated with better academic performance.

Changes in expectations overtime

Following admission, more than 35% of AAs were impressed with IB students, since they were all fluent in English, independent minded and outgoing. AAs believed, these special qualities would enable IB students to create a positive impact on Japanese Higher Education. IB students interviewed in the previous study had mentioned a discrepancy in curriculum adjustments for fall enrollments, which had initially caused confusion and took time to adjust. In reference to this, initially, almost 35% AAs expressed concern over whether IB students enrolled in fall, would be able to cover the gap in the curriculum and graduate in 4 years. However, over time, they found IB students to work hard in order to overcome this initial adjustment phase. Less than 30 % AAs also noted that, following enrollment and consequent interactions with IB students, they were able to comprehend the immense gap between the Japanese higher education and IB education.

Impressive aspects of IB students

All AAs agreed that, IB students were fluent in English, cheerful, friendly, with good communication and presentation skills, worked independently or in groups, had strong opinions, and were very global minded. Some AAs also added that their IB student's academic performance was excellent and among the top ranking students in the class.

Disappointments

Rather than disappointments, more than two thirds of AAs expressed concern over the difference in the education style between the IB and Japanese Higher Education, which led to initial adjustment difficulties, such as difficulty in understanding lectures, writing reports, understanding technical terms in Japanese, and concentrating in big classrooms with many students. Some IB students were also confused when choosing subjects, as their future career goals were unclear, which initially led to low academic performance. However, they worked hard and showed improvement over time. The remaining one third of AAs, found little or no differences among IB students and Japanese high school students, particularly IB students coming from Japanese IB schools or those who had attended Japanese cram schools or had prepared for the Japanese National University Entrance exam. Finally, most AAs agreed that these were preliminary impressions and, it was still too early to make general predictions about IB students, considering the fewer number of IB students in each department.

Impressions of non-IB students toward IB students

Feedback from other Japanese high school students or through personal observations, two thirds of AAs stated that, IB students adjusted well with other students due to their friendly, outgoing nature. Being part of various club activities, IB students developed a mutual bond with other students, where IB students helped other students with their English and, other students helped IB students with their Japanese. Some AAs also added that, IB students were kind and generous towards other students and took leadership roles during group work or presentations. In addition, senior IB students also helped new IB students adjust to university life. One third of AAs noted that, almost all Japanese high school students considered IB students as any other classmate and were not much aware about their IB educational background. Overall, there were no big adjustment difficulties between IB students and Japanese high school students.

IB student performance

Almost 50% of AAs were satisfied with the academic performances of IB students, and some were even highly satisfied. A little over 25% AAs hoped that, IB students would work harder to overcome difficulties in writing reports and understanding long lectures in Japanese. Most AA felt, it took IB students usually 6 months to 1 year in average, to completely adjust to the new Japanese academic environment. However AAs were optimistic about IB students, since those few IB students who initially faced some academic hurdles, worked very hard to overcome the situation, and improved their academic performance. Regarding difficulties with Japanese technical terms in Chinese characters (Kanji), AAs felt over time, IB students would pick up the pace and that this aspect was not so alarming. However, one important aspect of the IBDP curriculum that AAs brought into focus was, the depth of the curriculum covered in the 6 subject groups. Some AA felt, IB students who took subjects in higher level (HL), that is, 240 hours of study time, had similar subject knowledge as Japanese high school students, but IB students who took the same subject in standard level (SL), that is, 150 hours study time, sometimes lacked in-depth knowledge about that particular subject. Nevertheless, all AAs felt, if IB students worked hard on any subject, they could master it like any other student, since prior in-depth knowledge in any subject, was not a pre-requisite.

Familiarity of other faculty members with the IB education system

More than 70 % of AAs mentioned that, besides faculty members actively involved in IB admissions, others had little or no knowledge about the IB education system or IB student backgrounds. While most faculty members were eager to admit IB students, as they believed IB students would be an asset to Japanese society from a global

point of view, few faculty members were unsure whether IB students, with average or low DP scores, could actually contribute to the ongoing internationalization of Japanese Higher Education.

Need for departmental short briefing prior to enrollment

One third of AAs, who had some experience with IB students, felt they did not require initial briefing on IB students and IB education, as they were already quite familiar with the IB education system. However, two thirds of AAs, expressed a strong desire to hold short briefing sessions for new faculty members, who had little or no exposure to IB education.

Need for assistance from AC members regarding IB students

Similarly, AAs advisors who were eager about IB student enrollment but were new to the IB education system, wanted to learn more about the IB and IB students and hoped that, intermittent briefing sessions from AC members, would provide helpful information about IB students and assist them in creating a more IB friendly academic environment. Experienced AAs felt the student support system provided by the AC was very helpful, as IB students shared a more casual and friendly teacher-student relationship with AC IB advisors. They added, that this effort by the AC, would prove very helpful in the long run, as the number of IB students at Okayama University continues to increase, and further cooperation between AAs and AC advisors would become essential.

Suggestions for AC members regarding IB admissions

The following suggestions were made by AAs for IB students, interested in studying at Okayama University. Besides students enrolling in the English based program, other IB students need to become a little familiar with the Japanese high school education system, including Kanji for technical terms. As advice for AC members, they were asked to provide continuous support to IB students, and hold short briefing sessions for faculty members interested in enrolling IB students. Finally, in order to make Okayama University more IB friendly, AAs felt it is important for both students and teachers, to change their mindset and look beyond traditional ways of Japanese higher education, in addition to becoming more familiar with global standards of education.

DISCUSSION

Internationalization of higher education in any country requires changes and adjustments in existing educational policies to meet trending global standards, from both academic and socio-economic perspectives⁹. Since the 1980s, the Japanese government has been making efforts to internationalize the higher education sector by expanding their own system, by increasing the number of foreign students in Japanese Universities and more recently, by increasing foreign faculty to transform home-grown students¹⁰⁻¹³.

The IB education system although internationally accredited, is relatively unknown to most Japanese people, including educators. Even until recent years, knowledge about the IB was limited to parents of children attending international schools. It was only until 1979, that MEXT officially recognized the IB diploma as an equivalent to Japanese high school graduation³⁻⁴.

Nevertheless, questions still remain as to how the IB can make a difference in Japanese Higher Education. Since the IB emphasizes inquiry-based learning and critical thinking skills, perhaps it can help the expansion of Japanese education beyond knowledge acquisition and exam-centered admission policies. At the base of IB education lies the core concept of “not just knowing what we know — but how we know it”.

Five years ago, when Okayama University decided to accept IBDP students, only faculty members involved in IB admissions had knowledge about the IB education system. For other teachers and students, IB was almost an unknown entity. Therefore, when the first IB students enrolled at Okayama University, it was a challenge for both

the IB students and the AAs. While, IB students felt it was a great opportunity to study at a national university, without having to take the national university entrance exam, AAs were eager to accept IB students coming from a globally recognized educational background, in hope that they would further internationalize the existing educational environment¹⁴. Following admission, both AAs and IB students had varied experiences. Although the overall IB student impressions remained positive, AAs realized that, all IB students were not alike and in some cases, IB students were somewhat different from other Japanese high school students.

Although it was mandatory for all IB students to take the subject Japanese language A, equivalent to native Japanese in the Diploma program, in order to be eligible for admission into the various faculties of Okayama University (excluding the English based course), some IB students still faced difficulties while writing reports and understanding technical terms in Japanese. For some AAs, this was unexpected, as most AAs believed that the language proficiency of IB students who took Japanese Language A, were no different from other Japanese high school students. The importance of knowing Japanese in Japanese Higher Education, lies in the fact that most undergraduate subjects are taught in Japanese. Therefore, a certain level of Japanese proficiency is expected of all students entering the undergraduate program, irrespective of student background or faculty.

Another aspect new to most IB students in the undergraduate program, was the ability to memorize versus the ability to discuss. At IB schools, students attend small classes where every student actively participates in discussions. However, at Japanese universities, due to the greater number of students, most lessons in general education, are lecture oriented and there is little room for discussion. In addition, Japanese high school students are accustomed to the traditional learning system of knowledge acquisition, without much discussion. Therefore, they are familiar with lecture oriented lessons compared to IB students.

In spite of the inevitable, initial adjustment phase, most AAs felt, IB students worked hard and were able to overcome such preliminary hurdles within a few months and, AAs who hosted more than one IB student, used their experience to guide new IB students in their initial adjustment phase. However few AAs also felt that, since IB students were entering the Japanese higher education system, they should try to make effort to fit in, like any other Japanese high school students.

To adapt to any new academic environment, requires effort from all persons involved, including students, teachers and concerned authority.

Students on their part need the capability to familiarize themselves with completely new and challenging environments, which fortunately, IB students are well trained to do. Perhaps for IB students, a deeper understanding of the Japanese culture with regard to senior-junior student relationships, or the habit of using formal Japanese in specific situations, etc. could be helpful. Possibly, that is why IB students from IB schools in Japan, seem to adjust faster to university life. In addition, if AAs can accept the fact that, IB students are different from other Japanese high school students, in terms of thinking and absorbing knowledge, perhaps they can understand IB students more easily and, provide better guidance and encouragement. In an ever evolving world, every student needs to be encouraged to be themselves and overcome stereotypes.

CONCLUSION

Although IBDP students at Okayama University are enrolled without having to take the standard written examination or any other individual entrance examinations, their eagerness to learn, is no less than Japanese high school students, who take the general university entrance exam. Therefore, support from AAs in the early stages of orientation, is essential for IB students to adjust to the new way of learning and new educational approach. At

Okayama University, AAs are making every effort to understand and educate themselves about the IB education system and IB students. Some faculties are even holding meetings to discuss alternative ways to educate IB students. As a pioneer of IB student admissions in Japan, collaborative efforts by IB student advisors and AAs at Okayama University, are fully underway to create a more IB friendly University and increase the number of IBDP students.

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