

THE INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE DIPLOMA STUDENT PERSPECTIVE ON STUDENT LIFE AT OKAYAMA UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Japanese Universities began admitting International Baccalaureate Diploma (IB) students since 1979. Okayama University was the first national university to accept IB students in 4 faculties and 1 special Matching Program (MP) course without entrance exams. From 2015, all 11 faculties and the MP course welcomed IB students. This report is a step forward in creating a more IB student friendly university environment, based on IB student voices. Nine out of 10 IB students took part in the survey. October admissions, the MP course, low tuition fees, tuition fee waivers, admission with minimum diploma scores and parent recommendations, were among the main reasons for students to choose Okayama University. As the academic year in Japan starts from April, IB students enrolled in October have to take secondary freshman courses before introductory freshman courses, in the following spring. This disparity led to some students being unable to identify themselves as neither freshman nor sophomore, and affected their club activities which also begin in April. IB students who attended Japanese cram schools had no difficulty understanding Japanese lectures and writing reports in Japanese. Some seemed dissatisfied with too many text-book oriented lectures instead of experiments and field work. Students from Japanese IB schools adjusted faster to university life than returnees. All IB students felt non-IB students and teachers had little or no knowledge about the IB education system. In order to encourage IB student university admissions, it is important to understand IB student needs and develop a strong IB student support system.

Keywords: International Baccalaureate Diploma Program, Super Global University, Globalization of Japanese Universities.

INTRODUCTION

With the ongoing globalization of Japan, there has been a rapid growth in the internationalization of Japanese universities, since higher education plays a very important role in the process of globalization (1). In 2014, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), introduced the Super Global Universities (SGU) project and selected 37 top Universities that have the potential of leading the way for other universities in the future. Two types of financial aids A and B, were provided for the reformation of the present university educational system in compliance with global trends (2). Okayama University was selected under type B, with the aim of developing into a role model global university, to stimulate cooperation with top world universities and foster innovative approaches for global competitiveness. 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 skills (3-4). In 1979, MEXT officially recognized the IB diploma

(IBDP) equivalent to Japanese high school graduation (5-6). Okayama University was the first national university in Japan to accept IBDP students as high school graduates in 4 faculties and 1 special course called the “Matching Program (MP) in 2012, and in all 11 faculties and the MP course from 2015 (7), without having to take the examinations by the National Center for University Entrance Examination (NCUE) or any other entrance exams at Okayama University. The MP course is a four-year bachelor course, which was designed by Okayama University to meet individual student needs. Students in the MP course, with the help of an academic advisor, are able to choose subjects freely from most major faculties (except pharmaceutical, medical and dental faculties) and design a unique and tailor made course suited to their ambitions. MP course students are given plenty of academic freedom and are not required to follow the standard set curriculum of each faculty. They also have greater opportunities to go abroad for short-term study programs or internships. IBDP students intending to apply for the 4-year bachelor course at Okayama University, are required to have a minimum full diploma score of 24 for all faculties and the MP course except for the 6 year medical school, which requires a minimum score of 39 to apply. The aim of this survey was to obtain views and perspectives of IB students presently enrolled at Okayama University, in hope of improving the overall university system to efficiently cater to the needs of IB students and create a more IB student-friendly academic environment. This is a report based on questionnaires and one-on-one interviews of IB students presently enrolled in the different faculties and MP course at Okayama University.

METHODOLOGY

Between April 2012 and October 2015, a total of 10 IBDP students from IB schools in Japan, Holland, Germany and Singapore were admitted to Okayama University. Eight students (5 male; 3 female) enrolled into the MP course and 2 female students into the Medical School and Health Science Faculty. Nine IBDP students (5 male; 4 female) took part in the survey and were interviewed by student advisors from the Admission Center of Okayama University. Students were asked a variety of questions ranging from their reasons to choose Okayama University, their present academic life, their campus life, any existing hurdles, and things which they felt needed further improvement at Okayama University, in order to better accommodate IB students.

RESULTS

The main reasons students gave for choosing Okayama University included, direct university admission with IBDP scores without having to take the entrance examinations by NCUE and Okayama University; acceptance of minimum IBDP scores in the MP course; a rare opportunity for October admissions, which seemed flexible and adaptable particularly for returnee students graduating overseas in May; the uniqueness of the MP course to choose subjects freely and study abroad opportunities; low tuition fees, tuition fee waivers, and an impressive global image of Okayama University obtained through university fairs in Japan and overseas. A few returnee students stated they were recommended by their parents, who wished for their foreign-educated children to pursue a career in Japan, and were highly impressed by the admission policies of Okayama University with regard to IBDP students. Although October admission and the MP course were major deciding factors to choose Okayama University, following enrollment in October, some students found it difficult to adjust to academic and campus life. One of the main reason for dissatisfaction was having to take the secondary freshman classes first in fall and the introductory freshman courses in the following spring. Students were confused with the academic overlapping and were unable to

identify themselves as neither freshman nor sophomore. Some IB students were also initially reluctant to join club activities from October, as they lacked the confidence to keep up with club members who had already joined in April and had developed ample skills for club activities. Oppositely, IB students who joined in April with other non-IB freshman students, did not face any of the above mentioned problems. Besides academic differences, IB students educated with the IB philosophy, seemed at ease in expressing their opinions freely and enjoying discussions openly, unlike their Japanese counterparts, who appeared to be restricted in their expressions and preferred to go with group decisions, rather than stand out as being opinionated. This difference in thinking sometimes built barriers between some IB and non-IB students and required time and effort to resolve issues and develop friendships. In order to narrow this difference, a few IB students felt that Okayama University should take more initiatives in spreading knowledge about the IB education system and IB students, among non-IB students and even teachers, who were still unfamiliar with the IB philosophy. When asked about a lesson they enjoyed most, most IB students mentioned English communication. Although the level of English was too easy for them, this type of lesson bore a resemblance to the type of lessons they took in the IBDP program and allowed them to freely interact with other students and teachers in English.

Regarding other lectures, IB students expressed dissatisfaction with too many text book-oriented lectures followed by written reports. IB students longed for lessons involving practical experiences, many experiments and lots of field work. IB students who graduated from IB schools in Japan, seemed to adjust faster to Japanese University life than returnee IB students, who had been away from Japan since their early years. Moreover, IB students who previously attended Japanese cram schools in Japan or overseas, and had also prepared for the NCUE examinations, did not have difficulty understanding lectures and writing reports in Japanese. Nevertheless, the system of “memorizing” still seemed difficult for most IB students, who were used to “discussion oriented educational approaches”. Presently, senior IB students are taking the initiative to share their own experiences and are extending their help to their junior counterparts, and helping them to settle down in their academic and social lives. The IB student bonding and frequent student interaction has helped many IB students adjust to university life more readily.

DISCUSSION

The IBDP program is a pre-college curriculum, which offers an internationally recognized diploma. The aim of this organization is to internationalize secondary school education and nurture global citizens (3-4). Although the Japanese government has officially recognized IB Diploma equivalent to Japanese high school graduation since 1979, there is still a long way to revise the inflexible Japanese education system, which is not yet fully equipped to accommodate a western designed curriculum. Okayama University was the first national university in Japan to recognize the importance of incorporating the IB education system into college education through IB student admissions, since 2012. However, in order to implement the successful enrollment of IB students into Japanese Universities, it is important to first understand the fundamentals of the IB education system and the basic characteristics of IB students. Presently Okayama University faculty members deeply involved in IB admissions, are making efforts to arrange symposiums and seminars at Okayama University, by inviting IB teachers, current IB students and ex-IB students from other parts of Japan, to share their personal IB experiences and raise awareness about the IB education system and IB philosophies. In addition to encouraging IB admissions every year, it is also important to form a strong IB student support system at Okayama University, which can enable smooth

transition of IB students into academic and campus life. Keeping this in mind, Okayama University has taken active measures to appoint student counsellors whom IB students can consult for any kind of advice, at their own convenience. The student counsellor also keeps in touch with currently enrolled IB students through an “IB LINE GROUP”, where various information and announcements related to IB students are shared. IB students wishing to contact the student advisor or get in touch with each other can also do so, through this group. Following admission, IB entrants are encouraged to become a member of this LINE group, in order for student advisors to be able to provide support on a regular basis, as per student requirements. In order to create an exclusive international environment, where all Okayama University students can heighten their linguistic capacities and communication skills through exchanges with students from all over the world, the university has set up the “L-café” or Language café. This international space welcomes any student who has an interest in foreign languages and/or wants to interact with overseas students and teachers in a relaxed environment. Most IB students at Okayama University work part-time at the L-Café. To nurture and implement the IB student characteristics developed through IB education, it is important to modify the present university lessons and encourage further teacher-student interactions. Okayama University faculty members involved in educational reform are thoroughly studying the IB assessment criteria and trying to adapt certain IB methods and revising the present curriculum, through the actions of several working groups.

CONCLUSION

Finally, in addition to increasing the number of IB student recruitments, it is important to focus on the motivating factors and the lived experiences of currently enrolled IB students, to bring a change. Presently, Okayama University is making every effort to help in the smooth transition of IB students into University. With effective planning, proper student support and understanding, Okayama University aims to develop and provide a positive academic and social experience for present and future IB students. Through this report, Okayama University has taken the first pioneering initiative in giving importance to IB student voices.

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