

BENEFITS OF INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE (IB) STUDENT FOLLOW-UP FROM ENROLMENT TO GRADUATION

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ABSTRACT

Okayama University was the first national university in Japan to accept International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma students, exempting them from any entrance exams. From April 2012 to April 2025, 168 IB students have enrolled across 10 faculties and one program. This follow-up overview summarizes a 13-year database that offers insights into changes aimed at attracting IB students, including appointing an IB student advisor, establishing an IB community, connecting IB seniors with juniors, tracking IB students from admission to graduation, and revising admission policies over time. These efforts have made Okayama University the most IB-friendly University in Japan and within the global IB community.

Keywords: International Baccalaureate, Student Follow-up, Japanese Higher Education, Research Education

INTRODUCTION

The International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IBDP) is a transformative two-year course that opens doors to universities worldwide. This inquiry-based program enhances students' overall knowledge while supporting their physical, intellectual, emotional, and ethical development. A key focus of IB education is a strong emphasis on critical thinking skills, enabling students to reflect on and understand their own viewpoints, thereby fostering a greater appreciation for others and the world around them (1,2,3,4). As Japan continues to globalize, internationalization at Japanese universities has accelerated, given that higher education plays a vital role in globalization (5). In 1979, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) officially recognized the IB Diploma Program as equivalent to a Japanese high school diploma (6). Okayama University became the first national university in Japan to accept IBDP students as high school graduates across four faculties and one special program. By 2015, this acceptance extended to all 11 faculties and the special program, without requiring IB students to take any additional entrance exams or written tests (7). In all areas of higher education, student follow-up can significantly enhance student success, deepen understanding of their experiences, and provide valuable insights for institutional improvement. Tracking students helps identify where they need academic or non-academic support and contributes to their overall achievement, both on campus and in daily life. Support in higher education can come from external sources, such as classmates, friends, or family, as well as from university-led resources, including various types of advisors (8). One of the main goals of student follow-up is to monitor student success actively. Student follow-up aims to gather comprehensive insights into students' experiences by understanding their perceptions, challenges, and suggestions for improvement. By collecting student feedback on course content, teaching methods, and learning resources, the institution can identify areas for enhancement and ensure the curriculum remains relevant and engaging. A primary objective of student follow-up is to

increase retention rates. Admissions follow-up involves strategies and processes higher education institutions use to stay in touch with prospective students throughout the admissions cycle. The main goal is to guide applicants through the application process, answer their questions, and ultimately encourage enrollment. Student engagement follow-up involves checking in on current students and supporting them to ensure their academic success, personal well-being, and overall satisfaction with their college experience. It also focuses on identifying students who may be struggling and providing them with the resources and support they need to succeed. Follow-up with graduates involves tracking alums's career paths and experiences after leaving the institution. The goal is to understand how the institution's programs impact graduates' lives, gather feedback to inform program improvements, and build a strong alumni network. The purpose of the ongoing 13-year IB student follow-up at Okayama University includes several strategic and student-centered reasons, such as providing academic support, fostering community, improving programs, assessing institutional effectiveness, preparing students for careers, and increasing student retention. Since IB students often come from diverse educational backgrounds, they may face unique challenges as they adjust to the Japanese university system. Additionally, following up with IB students is essential for building a sense of community and establishing meaningful relationships. Many IB students come from different countries and cultures and may feel isolated or disconnected from the university community. The follow-up study aimed to gather insights into the experiences of IB students at Okayama University to prepare them for successful careers and postgraduate studies. The goal is for Okayama University to understand IB students better, improve retention rates, and be more supportive of them overall.

METHODOLOGY

Data for this ongoing follow-up research has been gathered through one-on-one interviews with IB students, academic and personal consultations at the IB Office, Zoom interviews and consultations, meetings with IB students directly at various college fairs or IB schools, and connecting with IB students via the social media platform LINE and group emails. The different types of follow-up procedures include:

1. Pre-admission IB student orientation and support

According to their respective faculties, IB students have two application periods at Okayama University. For those who successfully pass the August applications, there is a pre-admission online orientation where they can meet a) the Director of Admissions, b) the IB advisor, and c) faculty members from their respective departments. This experience allows IB students to enjoy the university's warm, welcoming atmosphere and ask faculty-specific questions. Additionally, it enables students to connect with the IB advisor via email or social media, who can then introduce them to senior IB members.

2. Post-admission IB student interview

This happens within one month of admission. All freshman IB students across all 10 faculties or schools, including those in the special program, receive a welcome email one week before the university classes start. This email invites them to schedule an appointment, either by email or by scanning a QR code, to visit the IB office and meet with the IB advisor. During their meeting with the IB advisor, which lasts between 30 minutes and 1 hour, IB students are asked to complete a form that includes the following details:

a) IB school, location

- b. How long have they studied the IB (Primary Year Program/Middle Year Program/Diploma Program)
- c. List of 6 IB Subjects they took in either higher level (HL) or standard level (SL)
- d. IB diploma final score
- e. Which faculty/school did they join?
- f. Which major did they choose?
- g. What club activities do they plan to do?
- h. The reasons for pursuing an IB education
- i. Why did they choose Okayama University?
- j. What do they expect from Okayama University?

3. New IB student orientation

The new IB student orientation is held each year during term two (mid-June), rather than immediately after admission. This schedule allows new IB students to adjust to university life, including course selection and other activities; therefore, holding the orientation in term two helps IB students settle in first. First-year IB students from all faculties and schools are invited to a small luncheon, along with any seniors interested in meeting their juniors or promoting their club activities to the juniors. This orientation is organized by the IB office in partnership with Admissions and is attended by the IB advisor and members of the Admissions Office.

4. Post-admission 6-month follow-up

With over 13 years of supporting IB students, Okayama University has found that it generally takes 6 to 12 months for these students to adjust to academic and campus life. To evaluate the progress of IB students six months after admission, all incoming IB students receive a Google Form in November each year, following admission in April, which they are asked to complete to update the IB office on their progress. The information requested in the Google form from IB students includes:

- a. Satisfaction with academic and campus life
- b. Challenges adapting to academic and campus life
- c. Which subjects seem complicated, and why?
- d. How do the teaching methods compare to the IB?
- e. How are the classes conducted in English?
- f. What challenges, if any, exist in taking classes in Japanese?
- g. How often do they speak English on campus?
- h. Suggestions for building a strong IB student community at the University
- i. Suggestions for adjusting to academic and campus life based on personal experience
- j. Advice for prospective IB students thinking of entering Okayama University

5. Student counseling from admission to graduation

Counseling at the IB office begins on the day of the first interview with the IB advisor following admission. All IB students are encouraged to connect with the IB advisor via LINE or email (for those who do not use LINE). Students can contact the IB advisor 24/7, including weekends and national holidays. They may seek counseling in person, by phone, or via text, depending on their individual needs. This support is available to all IB students across all 10 faculties, including the special program, from admission to graduation.

6. Follow-up at graduation

Once the students' graduation is confirmed and their national board exam results (for medicine, dentistry, nursing, pharmacy, and education) are available, the IB advisor personally contacts each IB student or reaches out through their respective faculties to find out where they will start working (company name, etc.) or if they will attend graduate school, along with their reasons (if applicable) for choosing their respective career paths.

7. Keeping in touch with Alumni

Some IB graduates leave the IB online community after graduation, while others stay; most stay connected with their IB advisor through various social media platforms. When the IB advisor visits their city of work or residence, some IB students eagerly come to meet the IB advisor along with their new families. A few IB alumni even help their juniors at the faculty or school where they graduated, or at their former IB schools. Occasionally, other alumni share their successes and career paths, guiding IB students toward similar career options.

RESULTS

Pre-enrollment benefits

- a. IB students feel connected to the IB community at Okayama University and to the IB advisor even before enrollment.
- b. IB students can contact their faculty or school seniors through the IB advisor for answers to their various questions.
- c. Meeting the IB Advisor, IB student parents, or IB school teachers at various college fairs and university sessions provides IB students with a warm and welcoming experience at Okayama University.
- d. The IB advisors' welcome message makes them very excited and happy to join Okayama University.

Post-enrollment benefits

- a. Having a lengthy conversation with the IB advisor within a week or two of their enrollment helps them feel safe and secure.
- b. Connecting with the broader IB community, including faculty, classmates, and seniors, gives IB students a sense of belonging and reassures them that they can seek help from others who share similar experiences.
- c. Meeting all freshman IB students face-to-face during the orientation across ten faculties and one program helps them make new friends and connect with seniors over a relaxed, friendly lunch. It also gives them a chance to interact with the IB advisor and other admissions staff.
- d. Connecting with the IB advisor through LINE or email 24/7 assures IB students that if they encounter any problems or need advice, they have access to a dedicated office and an experienced IB student advisor who understands their needs as IB students.

Benefits of Admissions Personnel & Faculty Members (knowledge gained through follow-up)

1. Understanding that not all IB students are the same, there are currently four types of IB students enrolled at Okayama University: a) IB students from international schools abroad; b) IB students from international schools in Japan; c) IB students from Article 1 schools who take four of six IB subjects in English; and d) IB students who have completed the dual language IB, meaning they have studied four of six IB subjects in Japanese.

2. IB student traits vary greatly depending on their school environment. The longer a student stays in the IB program, the more they are shaped by it.
3. Knowledge gained in IB subjects at the standard level (SL) might sometimes fall short of understanding university courses.
4. The knowledge gained from advanced study of IB subjects (higher level or HL) offers a deeper understanding of each topic and appears sufficient for university-level courses.
5. A higher IB diploma score leads to better academic performance, depending on the Faculty or School.
6. According to IB students, the core subject, extended essay (EE), appears to offer the most significant benefits at university compared to the other two IB core subjects (Mahmood, 2022; Mahmood, 2024).
7. The other core subjects, Theory of Knowledge (TOK) and Creativity, Activity, Service (CAS), promote discussion skills, leadership opportunities, and extracurricular involvement among IB students both in Japan and internationally.
8. Some subjects in the Japanese high school curriculum are not included in the IB curriculum, which often causes IB students to struggle with these topics in class. In such cases, consulting Japanese high school textbooks has helped many IB students better understand their overall courses.
9. IB students from international schools in Japan or abroad tend to experience more culture shocks related to teaching methods than IB students from Article 1, IB-accredited Japanese high schools, because they are more accustomed to Japanese teaching methods.
10. Not all IB students speak English fluently, as the IB education focuses more on pedagogy than on the language of instruction; however, IB students are in schools with an English-speaking environment or where English fluency is a priority.

DISCUSSION

Drawing on 13 years of data, it emphasizes the importance of understanding IB students and the IB education system, and of creating inclusive higher education environments where IB students feel valued and recognized (9). This ongoing engagement is essential for providing professors with evidence-based insights to support IB students effectively. The successful implementation of this approach at Okayama University, which has become Japan's most IB-friendly national university, serves as a compelling example. Over the past 13 years, data collection has revealed key characteristics and needs of IB students entering higher education. IB students often possess: a) strong academic foundations because the rigorous IB curriculum(10) equips students with broad knowledge and critical thinking skills; b) an inquiry-based learning experience as the IB emphasizes student-led inquiry, fostering independent learning and research skills; c) international-mindedness since the IB promotes intercultural understanding and global citizenship, shaping students' perspectives and values; d) developed communication and collaboration skills, as the IB program encourages effective communication and teamwork through various projects and activities; and e) a commitment to service and action, as IB students are actively involved in community service and social action initiatives during their IB education. However, it is also important to recognize that IB students may encounter unique challenges when transitioning to higher education, such as: a) adjusting to different teaching styles, since the shift from inquiry-based learning to more traditional lecture formats can be difficult; b) navigating unfamiliar academic expectations; c) understanding the specific requirements and assessment methods of various disciplines, which may require additional guidance; and d) building a sense of belonging, as integrating into a completely new academic and social environment can be challenging. Therefore, ongoing follow-up of IB students is vital for overcoming these challenges and unlocking their

potential. Currently, supportive activities at Okayama University include engaging with IB students and providing valuable insights for professors who teach them. By collecting and analyzing data on student performance, engagement, and feedback, universities can identify areas where IB students excel and where they need extra support. It also helps in creating resources and programs tailored to the specific needs of IB students. This fosters a more inclusive and supportive learning environment by understanding their unique perspectives and experiences. Professors can foster a classroom culture that values diversity and encourages collaboration.

CONCLUSIONS

Okayama University's dedication to engaging with IB students has made it the most IB-friendly national university in Japan. The university has an IB office dedicated solely to IB students, offers a special orientation program for them, and has created IB communities both online and offline. Additionally, it consistently collects and analyzes follow-up data. As a result, Okayama University has seen a significant increase in the number of IB students applying and enrolling, along with higher student satisfaction and improved academic results over the 13-year follow-up period. Supporting IB students' success in higher education requires ongoing efforts to understand their unique backgrounds, needs, and goals. By actively engaging with IB students, Okayama University has fostered more inclusive and supportive learning environments, provided faculty with evidence-based insights, and empowered students to reach their full potential. The experience at Okayama University demonstrates that this approach can bring substantial benefits to both students and the institution, enhancing IB student success, deepening understanding of IB student experiences, and offering valuable insights for institutional improvement. Continued follow-up and adjustments based on data and student feedback are essential for maintaining and refining these positive outcomes.

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