

International Baccalaureate - 'It teaches you not to give up'

Make no mistake, an International Baccalaureate is tough, but that's when pupils really get going

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It's one thing to know what the International Baccalaureate (IB) might involve, but anyone enrolled on a programme or investigating the qualification for the first time may well be daunted by the prospect. The good news is that they won't be alone in those fears, as many students share them. They may also turn out to be largely unfounded.

"Before starting the IB I felt extremely intimidated," admits Josh Hammond, a student at St Clare's school, Oxford. "I had heard countless complaints about the difficulties of the IB. But, once you get going, you become more efficient at time management and the work seems less daunting."

There's plenty to think about when it comes to the day-to-day reality of following an IB programme and, like Hammond, many students and teachers highlight the importance of good time-management from the outset. "Your IB experience can become quite gruelling if you don't get on top of it," says Alex Bird, head of the theory of knowledge and world religions faculty at UWC Atlantic College. "If you've got a deadline in six months, don't wait until it's upon you. Chip away at it."

Although students need to sharpen their organisational and study skills, they needn't do it silently – or without support. "IB students are expected to be risk-takers and communicators," says Sarah Jinks, a biology teacher at St Clare's. "But the tasks we set are designed to help them develop those skills. You're not expected to have them when you arrive."

The IB emphasises dialogue and group work, she continues, which can initially be a stretch if you're used to a one-way flow of information from teacher to student. "Being willing to voice your opinions and participate may be intimidating at first," says Jinks. "The benefit is that you're forced to challenge what you think."

According to Bird, being exposed to other perspectives through group work as well as being required to carry on with a broad range of subjects can be both helpful and challenging for students. "They may struggle in one subject but be a master of another, and that can be very humbling," he explains. "But it's also really powerful, it will teach them not to give up and help develop their self-respect."

The IB's broad curriculum isn't its only selling point. At the core of the qualification are three elements – an extended essay, a series of creativity, action and service (CAS) activities, and the theory of knowledge course – that set it apart from other programmes and may seem alien to students at first. However, they clearly have a purpose. Former ACS Hillingdon student Oscar Croysdale, currently an undergraduate at the London School of Medicine and Dentistry, found that the extended essay gave him more confidence in his written work. "Students who last wrote an essay for their GCSEs have found it a big challenge," he says. "But because I completed the extended essay, I haven't found it so daunting."

Likewise, at the start of the course, the 150 hours of CAS activities students must undertake can seem intimidating. Not so, reassures St Clare's student Jonny Corrie: "CAS is the least intimidating part of the IB. It's an opportunity to do what you love the most and even try something you've never done before."

A wise choice of activities will stop it becoming a chore, he says, and the target isn't hard to reach with regular work. "Provided you attend an activity in each area at least once a week you won't have any problems."

Tom Walsh, vice-principal, adds that a further benefit is the recognition of the students' efforts within the curriculum. The end result is personal satisfaction and development. "Whether it's through sports teams, expeditions, learning to play a musical instrument or helping care for people with learning difficulties," he says.

The final aspect of the IB, the Theory of Knowledge course, considers abstract questions such as "What is reality?", explains Bird. "I'll ask, 'if we close the classroom door, how do we know that the corridor outside is still there?' Some people find that frustrating but then you'll bring it back to the subjects they're studying. For example, in the natural sciences, what would you have to do to prove that the corridor is still there?"

Charlie Constable, a student at Whitgift School in Croydon, London, explains that the theory of knowledge course broadens horizons and helps students strengthen their ideas or beliefs by questioning them. "My experience has been enjoyable, if a little strange at times, but that's the purpose of the course. I would advise people to come in to theory of knowledge with an open mind," he says.

The IB clearly challenges students and, as a result, parents can expect their charges to be tired (several students mention a need for plenty of coffee). They may even need to step in to enforce some time off now and then, says Bird, while Constable's father would support him with encouragement, persistent interest and discussions of how things were going.

Jennifer Nadel, whose son is at UWC Atlantic College, adds that the academic step up from GCSE to the IB can be quite large, "so children have to find their own motivation, otherwise they simply can't keep up".

She notes that the high workload can also mean setting aside holiday time for coursework and essays, but points out that support is always available from staff and other students.

Michael Burns, a Whitgift student, would agree. "The worst parts of the course have been the occasional nights where work has continued into the small hours of the morning," he reveals. "But the best parts have been being able to laugh them off, talking about our shared struggles with fellow IB students."

While the realities of the IB may include multiple deadlines, hard work and the occasional late night, there are plenty of benefits too: developing a broad, inquiring mind; self-discipline; even language skills. They're all things universities and employers value, and Bird adds that IB graduates are often the most interesting people "to sit and talk to about the meaning of life".

But for those only just beginning their IB journey, UWC Atlantic College student Nicholas Olsen has one simple bit of advice: enjoy it. "It's a once in a lifetime opportunity to continue education with a wide breadth of ideas and a lot of scope to try something new," he says. "Just have fun!"