

Exploring The Differences And Similarities Between International Baccalaureate Education And Japanese High School Education

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ABSTRACT

The number of International Baccalaureate (IB) students applying to Japanese Universities is on the rise. Okayama University is a Super Global National University (SGU) in Western Japan, which started IB admissions in 2012, and presently hosts 63 IB students including 11 graduates, in 11 faculties and 1 special program. Since the IB journey began in 2012, Okayama University has taken multiple approaches to become IB friendly. Through continuous follow up of enrolled IB students regarding academic and campus life, and regular feedback from faculty members regarding IB student performances and characteristics, Okayama University has discovered some basic differences between the educational approaches of IB accredited schools and Japanese High Schools (JHS). In order to further explore this observation, a two-phase research study was carried out. Between June 2018 and August 2019, the two surveys were carried out. In Phase-1, University faculty, familiar with IB education, visited IB schools in Japan and JHS, to observe lessons and interview teachers about their respective methods of education. In phase-2, the same faculty members carried out an email survey followed by one-on-one interviews of 10 Super Global High Schools (SGH) teachers in Japan, regarding the similarities and differences in characteristics of their students, based on the Japanese version of the IB learner profile. This chapter reports and summarizes results of this two-phase study and perspectives gained from various first-hand observations.

Keywords: International Baccalaureate, Japanese High School Education, Super Global High Schools, IB learner Profile, Japanese Higher Education, International Mindedness, Globalization, Cultural Backgrounds

INRODUCTION

With the ongoing globalization of Japan, there has been a rapid growth in the internationalization of Japanese universities. The International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IBDP) is a 2-year course preparing students for admission into Universities worldwide. The IBDP is an inquiry based secondary educational program, which aims to develop students who have excellent in-depth knowledge, and who can flourish physically, intellectually, emotionally and ethically. It was designed in 1968 post world war, by western scholars, to encourage international understanding, facilitate geographic and cultural mobility and play an important role in promoting world peace. In 1979, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), recognized the IBDP equivalent to Japanese high school graduation. Students who completed the IBDP from either International schools or "Article One" schools, were all eligible to apply for admission into Japanese Universities¹⁻⁶.

The Japanese High School (JHS) curriculum, is a 3-year program that prepares students for admission into Japanese Universities, or train students in technical and vocational courses, to find employment following graduation. The JHS curriculum covers grades ten through twelve. The first year includes basic academic courses, while in second year, course content and course selection is more individualized. Teaching methods at JSH are largely lecture based, focusing on deeper learning of major subjects, with the main goal of covering the very demanding curriculum within an allocated time span. Super Global High Schools (SGH) in Japan, are high schools that have received financial and supervisory support from MEXT, with the aim of fostering globalized leaders through education. Goals of this program include enhancing in-depth knowledge and awareness about social issues, developing communication and problem-solving skills and active participation in fieldwork activities both domestic and international. Okayama University was the first National University in Japan, to establish the IBDP admission policy in 2012, where IB students were exempted from taking the National University Entrance Exam or any other written exams, for admission into the undergraduate course. By 2015, all 11 faculties including the special program at Okayama University, were open to IBDP graduates⁷.

Over a period of 8 years from 2012 to 2020, Okayama University has taken multiple approaches to become IB student-friendly through: a) periodic revision of IB admission policies as per IB student requirements, b) listening to the voices of enrolled IB students, c) training faculty on IB education and, d) doing extensive research to explore the differences in IB education and Japanese High School education. These efforts enabled Okayama University to establish itself as a pioneer of IB admissions in Japan. Although the number of IB students at Okayama University are steadily increasing with each year, the majority of students are mostly Japanese High School graduates⁸. Therefore, it is important to compare IB education with Japanese High School education, and explore the basis of each education system through IB Student feedback, feedback from Faculty and surveys, for a better understanding and a smooth transition of IB students into Japanese higher education⁹.

METHOD

Feedback from IB students and Faculty

IB student feedback was obtained through questionnaires, interviews and round table discussions between IB students and faculty members. Within 4 weeks of admission, IB students had one-on-one interviews with the IB student advisor, regarding academic and campus life and were

henceforth followed up, through direct interaction or surveys¹⁰⁻¹¹. Faculty feedback regarding IB students was obtained directly from one-on-one interviews with each individual Faculty member who had one or more IB students in their respective faculties¹².

Survey Phase-1

In phase -1, Okayama University faculty visited 5 IB Schools and 5 JHS in Japan, to observe teaching methods and learning styles through grades 10-12. A general comparison was made between the class size, class location, lesson type, study material and class environment. To explore student learning methods, class involvement, class preparation, student reflection methods and frequency of asking questions during lessons, were compared between IB school and JHS.

Survey Phase-2

The IB program professes to develop internationally minded people, and at the heart of IB education is the IB learner profile². The ten aspirational qualities of the learner profile, namely, inquires, knowledgeable, thinkers, communicators, principled, open-minded, caring, risk takers, balanced and reflective, together, take a holistic approach to nurture students as lifelong learners, who can become responsible members of local, national and global communities. As an initial step in the survey phase-2 procedure, a questionnaire based on the Japanese version of the IB learner profile, was sent by email to 10 SGH schools, who had agreed to participate in this research survey. Next, Okayama University faculty visited each SGH and interviewed teachers regarding their survey answers. Each interview lasted about one hour, and permission was taken from all SGH coordinators regarding publication of survey results, anonymously.

RESULTS

Survey Phase-1

General differences between lessons at IB schools and Japanese High schools included, differences in class size, class location, class environment, presence or absence of combined classes, type of lesson and type of study material used in lessons. Class sizes at IB schools, varied from a minimum of one student per class to a maximum of 16 students. In JHS, every class had a minimum of 37 students to a maximum of 40 students. Most lessons at IB schools were held in classrooms, and a few outside. All classes at JHS were held inside the classroom. At IB schools, the class environment was very casual, with students eating lunch during class, while at all JHS, eating during class hours was not permitted. Most classes at IB schools were discussion based, with active participation from all students, whereas, most classes at JHS were lecture-based, teacher centered and students spoke only when asked to.

Finally, regarding study material, all IB students used laptops and were constantly researching topics, as the class progressed. At JHS, course textbooks and worksheets prepared by the teacher were the main study tools, in addition to some power point presentations (Table 1).

Table 1 General differences between lessons at IB schools and JHS

	IB School	JHS
Class size	1-16 students	37-40 students
Location	Indoors or outdoors	Indoors
Environment	Casual	Very academic
Combined classes	SL and HL together	Never
Lesson type	Discussion based	Lecture based
Study material	Laptops mainly	Textbooks /worksheets

IB: International Baccalaureate; JHS: Japanese High School; SL: Standard level; HL: Higher level

To explore the differences between ways of learning in IB schools and JHS, the following factors were compared: class involvement, mode of reflection, asking questions in class, preparation for class and student responsibilities in class. At IB schools, almost all students engaged in active discussions with each other & their teacher. In JHS, student involvement included answering questions asked by the teacher or discussing in small groups or pairs when instructed by the teacher. IB students voiced their opinions freely in class and student reflection was active and vocal, while most students at JHS reflected through writing.

IB students asked questions throughout the lesson. In JHS, students never asked questions unless instructed to do so. Most IB students seemed prepared to discuss. JHS students referred to textbooks and worksheets prepared by the class teacher during class, to grasp the topic in discussion. Regarding student responsibilities during class, most IB students did extensive research about the class topic beforehand, whereas, attendance, concentration, and researching class topics during or after the lesson, was a more common way of taking responsibility in JHS students. (Table 2).

Table 2 Differences in ways of learning between IB schools and JHS

	IB School	JHS
Class involvement	Active	Passive
Mode of reflection	Mostly vocal	Mostly in writing
Asking questions	Frequent	Rare
Class preparation	Students research class topics beforehand and worksheets prepared by the class teacher	Students use textbooks
Student responsibility	Preparation and active participation	Attendance and attentiveness

IB: International Baccalaureate; JHS: Japanese High School

Survey Phase-2

Results of phase-2 (Table 3) revealed that, the most common characteristic between SGH students and IB students, with reference to the IB learner profile was, "Balanced". Six out of 10 SGH teachers agreed that, 100% of their students balanced academic responsibilities and extra-curricular activities well and, 4 out of 10 felt, 100% of their students were reflective, thinkers, caring and communicators. The least common characteristic between SGH and IB students, was "Risk taker". None of the SGH teachers felt their students were 100% risk takers. Five out of 10 thought 80% of their students could be risk takers, while the remaining five agreed only 60% students could be regarded as risk takers. When SGH teachers were asked about the prevalence of "Inquirers" among their students, 7 out of 10 mentioned that, about 80% of their students had an "inquiring mind", while 2 coordinators felt almost 100% students were "Inquirers".

Only 1 SGH teacher felt the percentage of inquirers was less than forty. Independently, teachers at S-4 believed that, 100% of their students had at least 7 of the IB profile traits, in comparison to S-3, who felt "Caring" was the only IB profile trait present in 100% of their students. Regarding the remaining 9 traits, S-3 had variable opinions.

Table 3 Prevalence of IB learner profile characteristics in 10 SGH students

	B	R	T	C	O	P	K	CO	I	RT
S-4	●		●	●	●	●	●	●	○	○
S-7	●		●	●	●	●	○	○	○	○
S-5	●		●	●	○	○	●	○	●	○
S-1	●		●	○	●	○	○	○	○	○
S-2	●		○	○	○	○	○	○	●	○
S-9	●		○	○	○	○	○	○	●	○
S-8	○		○	○	○	○	○	○	●	○
S-10	○		○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
S-6	○		○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
S-3	○		○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

S1-S10: Super Global High Schools (SGH); B: Balanced; R: Reflective; T: Thinkers; C: Caring; ● 100% ; 80% ○ 60% ; ○ 40% ▲

DISCUSSION

At the heart of all forms of Japanese Higher education, lies the essential qualities that are required to suit mostly, Japanese national needs. Unlike the west, admission into the undergraduate course at most Japanese Universities, is a two-step process. As the first step, most high school students take the standardized "National Center Test". Based on the scores of this test, students take a second test, to enter a University of their choice. Since Japanese high school students have only one chance per year to take the "National Center Test", they are constantly under immense pressure from parents, teachers and society to score high on this test, because in Japan, being a fresh University graduate, automatically upgrades the student's professional and personal status.

Dixon Inugai et al ³ narrated that, many societies value the authoritative and unquestionable method of containing knowledge and information. These skills are then passed on via the transmission model of teaching, where the main learning resources are the teacher and course textbooks. This style of teaching has been adopted in most high schools in Japan. In a typical setting, as was observed in this survey, the teacher speaks in class most of the time and asks questions to check how much students have understood what is being taught. Students at most JHS, learn from textbooks or by taking notes through the process of memorization. However, in a rapidly evolving global context, the way in which information and knowledge is perceived, has changed drastically over the years. Since there is so much knowledge available via different digital platforms, the old canonical method of acquiring knowledge is no longer as effective. To prepare students towards the present global context, inquiry-based teaching methods in combination with the existing transmission methods of teaching, are essential.

The IB education on the other hand, involves a lot of discussions, research projects, and community service, which encourages students to be independent minded and think critically. The IB learning experience also makes the student more international minded and equips students with lifelong skills to succeed at a global level ². The phase-1 survey revealed three important differences between IB schools and JHS, regarding student-teacher interactions. The first big difference was, class size. Smaller class sizes at IB schools seemed to provide greater opportunities for students to engage in discussions with each other and the teacher. Moreover, since most students came prepared for class discussions, teachers could provide better academic and personal support. Disadvantages of a small class is the burden of cost on the school, while the disadvantage of large classes of more than 25 to 30 students is that, it is difficult to engage students who are shy to express their opinions or participate in group work. However, the advantages of a large classroom is student independence. Since teachers are preoccupied in completing core lessons in a limited time span, they have less one-on-one time with students during class. So, students have the responsibility of studying by themselves or be part of a group study, which can make them interdependent and empathetic. During class, IB students seemed to voice their opinions freely and showed active participation in class, compared to JHS students, who tended to listen more, express less and speak mostly when spoken to.

This could be a cultural difference rather than a difference in learning methods. Although JHS teachers were seen to use different techniques for student involvement, most JHS students appeared to be shy by nature and did not feel comfortable expressing their opinion vocally. Unlike the West, in most Asian cultures including Japan, expressing opinions freely in front of seniors or teachers is considered socially inappropriate. Role of subordinates or in this study, students, is to mainly listen, observe and learn ¹³⁻¹⁵. Finally, regarding course content and teaching methods, JHS and SGH, have the big responsibility of preparing students to pass the “National Center Test” and enroll in Japanese Universities. Therefore, with an average of 37-40 students per class to one teacher, and the need to cover the full high school curriculum in a limited time span, teachers at JHS or SGH have little time or scope to engage in detailed discussions and extensive fieldwork. In most JHS, emphasis is placed on the teacher to help students prepare for the Japanese University Admission test. IB education on the other hand, targets admission into Universities worldwide, so it aims to create independent learners, who possess an international mindset and can see the world from different cultural perspectives².

To develop active, compassionate and lifelong learners, the IB program has put together the IB learner profile, which helps to expand student skills beyond the classroom as lifelong learners, become internationally minded and responsible members of a global society². Phase-2 of the survey results showed that, the most similar characteristic between SGH students and IB students was, “Balanced” while the least similar characteristic was “Risk Taker”. While approaches to balancing academia and extracurricular activities may vary between IB schools and SGH, teacher satisfaction regarding student potential was found to be the same in both disciplines. Most SGH teachers found it difficult to define “risk takers” among their students, since in Japan, the word “risk” is interpreted as something dangerous or having a negative outcome.

Therefore, most Japanese try to avoid taking “risks”. In the West and in IB education, the word “risk” embodies a much stronger calculated approach when entering unknown territories, where there may be either successful outcomes or severe consequences. While globalization of education can play a big role in nurturing world citizens⁹, having a national or cultural identity is also essential, to help young learners appreciate and understand cultural diversities.

CONCLUSION

This study clarified some major differences and a few similarities between JHS, SGH and IB education. Further research studies including student follow-up post-graduation, may be necessary to better understand how different educational styles actually help students to excel and succeed in their respective career choices.

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