

An Educational Passport to the Future



Choosing the right curriculum for your child is critical - Claire Deacon discusses the benefits of the International Baccalaureate programmes available in Thailand and worldwide.

More and more people are becoming familiar with the International Baccalaureate curriculum, thanks in no small part to the number of schools in Thailand that have adopted the IB Diploma as their programme of pre-university study. It is steadily growing in popularity, but few people realise that the IB Diploma and its parent organisation, the International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO), has been around for nearly 40 years.

The International Baccalaureate Organisation was founded on the idea that schools should be able to have a comprehensive and academically rigorous curriculum and diploma recognised by universities around the world. As more and more students decided to further their studies abroad, the IB Diploma was designed to facilitate the international mobility of students preparing for university.

Once the IB Diploma was in place, the organisation recognised the need to develop programmes that would give younger students access to an IB education throughout their school life, so students could gather the skills they needed to succeed with IB. In 1994, they added the Middle Years Programme (MYP), a curriculum for students aged 11-16. The Primary Years Programme (PYP), for students aged 3-11, followed in 1997. The MYP and PYP seek to provide students with an international perspective and critical thinking skills they will perfect during the IB Diploma.

One of the important factors that differentiates the development of the IB programmes from state or national curricula, such as the American or British system, is that they have been developed by international educators rather than by local authorities or a national Ministry of Education. This has enabled best practices and curricula from around the world to be incorporated into the IB programmes. A school that

implicates all three curricula, and has been formally accredited by the IBO, is known as an IB World School. The school develops their programmes using the IBO's curriculum framework, assessment guidelines, and content requirements, which all have to meet criteria with regards to standards and practices. Within these specific guidelines, the school adapts the programmes so that they are relevant, engaging and significant for their students. The PYP and MYP are holistic and enquiry-based in their approach and couched in real-life situations, rather than being content-driven.

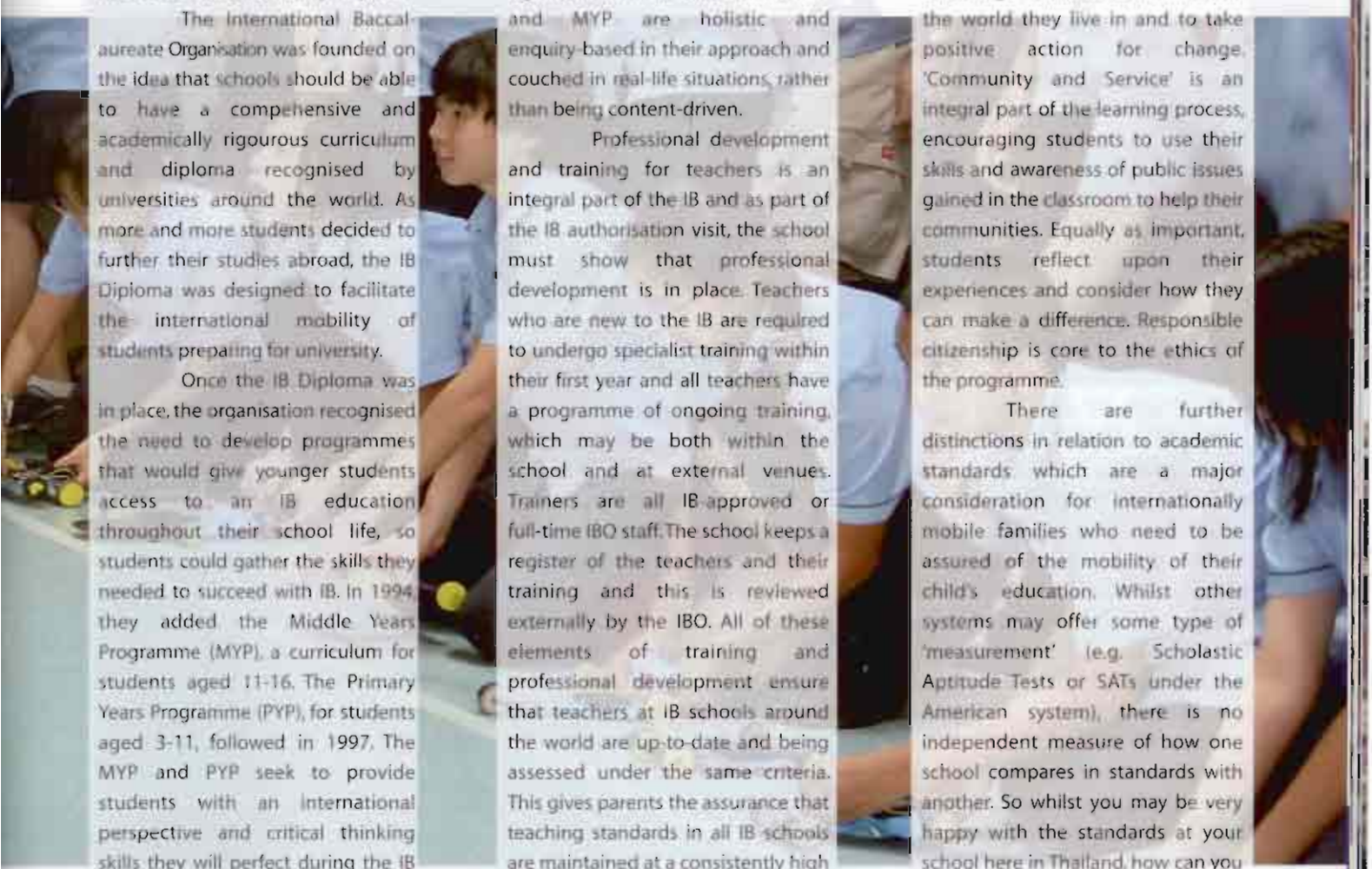
Professional development and training for teachers is an integral part of the IB and as part of the IB authorisation visit, the school must show that professional development is in place. Teachers who are new to the IB are required to undergo specialist training within their first year and all teachers have a programme of ongoing training, which may be both within the school and at external venues. Trainers are all IB-approved or full-time IBO staff. The school keeps a register of the teachers and their training and this is reviewed externally by the IBO. All of these elements of training and professional development ensure that teachers at IB schools around the world are up-to-date and being assessed under the same criteria. This gives parents the assurance that teaching standards in all IB schools are maintained at a consistently high standard.

Another crucial difference between an IB World School and schools running other curricula is the approach to learning itself. Look around at friends and colleagues, or cast your mind back to when you were at school, and you'll realise that people differ in the way they solve problems. We call this their intellectual (or cognitive) ability. We may differ from our friends not only in overall ability, but also in the pattern of our abilities. The IB

programmes cater expertly to these differences by encouraging students to acquire knowledge through varied learning principles – creating a level playing field for all. One of the most significant elements of the IB programme is the commitment to engendering students to be 'life-long learners'. This is integral to the teaching at an IB World School.

Another of the principles of the IB programmes is to encourage students to think about the world they live in and to take positive action for change. 'Community and Service' is an integral part of the learning process, encouraging students to use their skills and awareness of public issues gained in the classroom to help their communities. Equally as important, students reflect upon their experiences and consider how they can make a difference. Responsible citizenship is core to the ethics of the programme.

There are further distinctions in relation to academic standards which are a major consideration for internationally mobile families who need to be assured of the mobility of their child's education. Whilst other systems may offer some type of 'measurement' (e.g. Scholastic Aptitude Tests or SATs under the American system), there is no independent measure of how one school compares in standards with another. So whilst you may be very happy with the standards at your school here in Thailand, how can you be assured that the skills your child is gaining will transfer easily to another country? The curriculum, standards and teacher professional development at all IB World Schools are externally assessed on a regular basis by the IBO, meaning that consistency is maintained across all schools authorised to run IB programmes. As a parent, this means that you can be sure that an IB World School in Thailand will be consistent with an IB World School in New York, London, Sydney, Jakarta or wherever



else you may be headed next.

Thinking ahead to further education, you will no doubt want to be sure that your child is prepared to be successful in a university environment. The IB Diploma is accepted by universities around the world, including the best universities in North America, the UK, continental Europe, Australia and, of course, Thailand. More than this, the anecdotal evidence from universities shows that many prefer IB Diploma graduates, describing them as being better prepared with positive attitudes towards learning. In the United States alone, around 900 colleges and universities not only accept, but prefer the IB Diploma, including top universities like Princeton, Harvard, MIT, UCLA, New York University and Penn State. Many of these same universities will also offer significant credits to IB Diploma students – you can find out more by visiting the IBO website (www.ibo.org) and searching under 'country information'.

But let's take a step back... whilst the evidence is abundant that the IB Diploma is fantastic preparation for university life, doesn't that also mean that the preparation for entry to the IB Diploma should be just as critically assessed? As mentioned earlier in this article, many schools offer the IB Diploma as their pre-university programme, but prior to this students are studying under a different curriculum. The Middle Years Programme (MYP) is ideal preparation for the IB Diploma and, in turn, the Primary Years Programme is the ideal preparation for the MYP. After all, that's why the IBO developed the programmes in the first place. If your children are destined to be taking the IB Diploma then it makes sense to consider a full IB education as a complete educational passport to the future.

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In Brief: What makes the IB programmes so special?

- IB programmes are recognised around the world and ensure an increased adaptability and mobility for IB students.
- The curriculum and pedagogy of IB programmes focus on international perspectives of learning and teaching, while insisting that students fully explore their language skills and home culture.
- IB World Schools must undergo an exhaustive authorisation process in order to offer one or more of the programmes, which includes a study of the school's resources and commitment to the IB mission and philosophy.
- IB teachers participate in a wide variety of professional development opportunities to constantly update their knowledge and share their expertise with colleagues around the world.
- Many students graduating from the Diploma Programme find that it enhances their opportunities at tertiary institutions. The IB works closely with universities around the world to gain recognition for IB programmes.
- The core components of IB programmes encourage students to participate in creative and service-oriented activities, while at the same time emphasising the importance of reflection on a personal and academic level.