



Reflections on the Implementation of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) in Mainland China*

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Abstract

With the increasing number of schools offering the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) in mainland China, a series of issues have emerged during its implementation. This paper compares the current situation of IBDP schools in mainland China, including their operations and the career paths of graduates, to explore several prominent problems, such as the elitism of IBDP in mainland China, the loss of IBDP graduates and educational capital, and the absence of national education within the international curriculum. Drawing on the implementation of IBDP in other countries and their relevant policies, this paper discusses strategies to address these issues, aiming to improve the implementation of the IBDP in China and promote its healthy development.

Subject Areas

Pedagogy, Public Policy

Keywords

International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP), International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO), Overseas Students, International Schools, Global Citizenship Education, National Citizenship Education

1. Introduction

As internationalization and globalization advance, international curricula have become increasingly popular. At the high school level, many middle schools in

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China have introduced one or more types of international curricula, offering various forms of international education, such as international curriculum classes. Among these, the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP), authorized by the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO), has gained growing favor, with its scale continuously expanding. According to the latest data from the IBO website, the number of IB-authorized schools in mainland China has steadily increased in recent years, reaching 150 schools, making China the third-ranked country globally in the number of IBDP schools, behind the United States (962 schools) and Canada (187 schools) [1]. This article analyzes and compares the implementation status, curriculum design, and college admission outcomes of some IBDP schools in mainland China to explore several issues in its implementation and propose corresponding strategies. How does the implementation status of the IB Diploma Programme in mainland China compare to other countries and regions, and what are its unique characteristics? How can policies from other countries be leveraged to address the challenges faced during the IBDP's implementation in China? Does the IBDP's goal of fostering global citizenship conflict with national citizenship education, and how can such conflicts be balanced? The IBDP embodies concepts such as lifelong learning, international understanding, and critical thinking, holding significant practical value and relevance. However, it also has certain shortcomings and issues. Exploring these problems can help improve and develop the IBDP program in China while providing valuable insights for enhancing general high school education in the country.

Introduction to the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP)

The history of the IBDP traces back to 1948 with the League of Nations, initially designed to provide a sustainable, assessable, and high-quality education for the children of diplomats, multinational corporate executives, and other globally mobile professionals. As an international curriculum with over seventy years of history, the IBDP draws on the educational reform experiences of many countries, aiming for “Education for Life” as its educational goal. Through a comprehensive and balanced disciplinary framework and scientific assessment projects, it seeks to nurture outstanding global citizens. According to the International Baccalaureate Organization's statement, the mission of the IB program is “to develop inquiring, knowledgeable, and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through understanding and respecting different cultures” [2]. The IBDP curriculum is built around the understanding of core concepts and the exploration of global social realities, helping schools develop students' personal talents and teach them to connect theoretical knowledge with the external world. With the goal of cultivating competent global citizens, the IBDP focuses on developing core competencies such as communication and collaboration, creativity and problem-solving, critical thinking, and civic responsibility and social engagement—collectively known as “21st-century core competencies” [3].

The IBDP curriculum includes six subject groups: Language and Literature, Language Acquisition, Individuals and Societies, Sciences, Mathematics and Computer Science, and Arts. Each group offers various courses, with options for Higher Level (HL) and Standard Level (SL). Students must select one subject from each of the six groups, with each requiring 150 hours of instruction, of which three must be HL courses, requiring an additional 90 hours. Beyond the six subjects, students must complete Theory of Knowledge (TOK), an Extended Essay (EE), and Creativity, Activity, Service (CAS) courses. TOK encourages students to reflect on how they acquire knowledge, fostering critical thinking; the EE requires an independent research paper of approximately 4000 words; and CAS mandates at least three hours per week over two years for creative, active, and service-oriented activities, cultivating awareness beyond academics. All these requirements must be met simultaneously within the two-year IBDP period. The IBDP curriculum balances depth and breadth, aiming to develop well-rounded, globally competitive individuals. As Mary Enda Tookey notes, the IB “facilitates the sustained academic, cognitive, motivational, and emotional growth of gifted adolescents” [4].

The IBDP is a highly structured and challenging curriculum with uniform assessment standards. The IBO enforces strict management and oversight of its certified IBDP programs, earning widespread recognition from prestigious universities worldwide. Empirical studies by IB researchers globally demonstrate that the IBDP enhances academic performance and comprehensive abilities. For instance, Anna Rosefsky Saavedra analyzed data on 20,422 students from 13 Chicago Public Schools (CPS), including demographic characteristics, IB enrollment, high school graduation, and college admission rates, finding that the IBDP improved academic achievement, graduation rates, and college enrollment [5]. Canadian scholars Mary Lee Taylor and Marion Porath surveyed IB graduates from two public schools in British Columbia, revealing that graduates valued the diverse curriculum, developed critical thinking and time management skills, and felt well-prepared for higher education [6]. Similar findings emerge from Europe; Andrei Corneliu Holman compared IB students from three Eastern and Central European countries with non-IB students in Romania, showing that IB’s educational strategies better fostered personality traits, increasing the likelihood of academic success [7]. Due to their exceptional comprehensive abilities, IB graduates are highly favored by top universities worldwide. As the IBO website states, “The critical thinking and research skills of IB students enable them to consistently excel in university—they often enter the world’s best universities” [8].

2. Characteristics of Elite Education in Mainland China’s IBDP Schools

In mainland China, the implementation of the IBDP reflects the traits of elite education. Compared to other countries and regions, the IBDP schools in mainland China present a distinctly different landscape, consisting primarily of high-fee pri-

vate schools or international divisions of public schools. Of the 962 IBDP schools in the USA, 832 are public, accounting for 86% of the total; in Canada, 149 of the 187 schools are public, approximately 80%. However, in mainland China, only 26 of the 150 schools are public, comprising just 17.3%. Notably, even the IB programs in public schools are not truly public initiatives but rather special educational pathways for specific student groups. Some international divisions of public schools, such as the Shanghai High School International Division, exclusively admit students with foreign or Hong Kong/Macau/Taiwan region identities, with an annual fee of RMB 156,000 [9]. Although some public school international divisions are open to mainland students, their fees far exceed standard public school rates. Moreover, these IB programs operate independently of domestic sections, using different textbooks, teaching methods, assessment systems, and college admission pathways compared to students taking the Gaokao (National College Entrance Examination). In essence, nearly all IBDP schools in mainland China are profit-driven private institutions, lacking government financial or policy support.

The primary constraint on implementing the IB curriculum is the level of economic and cultural development, along with associated opportunities for international exchange and social curriculum resources. The introduction of the IB curriculum is highly rigorous, with certification by the International Baccalaureate Organization being a critical step. This certification involves not only reviews of human resources and facilities but also on-site inspections. The social resources required for the IB program, such as those for the Creativity, Activity, and Service (CAS) component, typically demand collaboration from families, communities, and society, placing high demands on related resources. Regions lacking such family and social support struggle to implement this component. Additionally, the experimental courses in the IB program require schools to have substantial financial capacity to purchase necessary equipment and teaching tools. Given these factors, schools in economically disadvantaged areas find it challenging to meet these hardware requirements. Without policy or funding support, it is understandable why the vast majority of IBDP schools in mainland China are private and concentrated in economically developed cities, with Shanghai hosting 51 schools, Beijing 40, and Guangdong 37, accounting for 80% of the total.

Furthermore, the high tuition and examination fees of the IB curriculum set a significant entry barrier, limiting access for children from average-income families. Even in economically advanced first-tier cities, only higher-income households can afford it. For example, in South China, the annual tuition for IBDP programs ranges from RMB 189,120 to 219,840 at Guangzhou Utahloy International School [10], RMB 210,000 at Guangdong Biyun Garden School [11], and RMB 178,000 at Alcanta International College [12]. The median tuition for the two-year DP program exceeds RMB 400,000, excluding additional costs for tutoring, exams, or study trips. Such exorbitant fees deter average-income families. According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China's latest data on August 7, 2020, the per capita national income in 2019 reached USD 10,410 [13]. The IBDP tuition alone

surpasses the average combined income of both parents in many Chinese households. As a result, the IBDP in mainland China has largely become an elite and aristocratic form of education, accessible primarily to children from affluent families in economically developed regions.

Evidently, the primary audience for international high school diploma programs in mainland China is characterized by their rich cultural capital and high economic status. Parents choosing IB education are often highly educated, have worked or lived abroad, and belong to middle- or upper-income brackets. This contrasts sharply with the student demographics of IBDP schools in other countries. In the USA, despite criticism from far-right patriotic groups, IB education thrives as the country with the highest number of IB schools, most of which are state-funded public institutions, a concentration unmatched globally. These public IB programs are supported by federal funding with the explicit goal of serving underserved communities (IBO, 2013) [14]. Similarly, since 2013, the Japanese government has provided annual funding for IB development, translating official materials into Japanese for public access by local governments and schools [15]. With government financial support and policy promotion, IBDP courses and exams in Japan have gradually shifted to being conducted in the national language.

As previously mentioned, the IBDP offers undeniable advantages in cultivating individuals with critical thinking, cross-cultural abilities, and global competitiveness. The rapid global expansion of IBDP schools is inseparable from its advanced teaching philosophy and excellent talent output. To cultivate globally competitive talent as a strategic goal, the Chinese government could learn from other countries' experiences by providing policy and financial support for the IBDP, enabling more public school students to access these courses. As IB education expert Paul Tarc suggests, only with substantial external funding can the IB benefit disadvantaged groups rather than solely serving privileged ones (123 - 131) [16].

One possible solution is through allocating state funding to subsidize IBDP tuition in public schools offering the program, targeting families earning China's median household income (approximately 70,000 RMB/year in urban areas, per 2023 China Family Panel Studies). Subsidies could cover 50% - 75% of fees, reducing costs to 50,000 - 75,000 RMB annually. Another possible way is to expand bilingual (Chinese-English) IBDP tracks in public high schools, capping tuition at 20,000 RMB/year—equivalent to Gaokao prep costs—integrating CNC content to align with national goals. However, as a major educational nation, how China can maintain its educational characteristics while integrating advanced international concepts warrants further exploration.

3. Loss of IBDP Graduates in Mainland China

Currently, apart from universities in Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan region, no public university in mainland China recognizes the IBDP diploma for mainland students. This not only leads to the loss of outstanding IBDP graduates but also results in significant educational capital outflow. IBDP school websites annually

publish admission statistics to attract more students, showing that nearly all graduates are admitted to overseas or offshore universities, with the most popular destinations being top 50 universities in the USA and UK. For instance, according to data from Guangdong Biyun Garden School, of the 248 graduates in the 2021 cohort, 239 were admitted to QS-ranked top 50 universities, including Oxford, Cambridge, the University of Chicago, UC Berkeley, and the University of Hong Kong [17]. Although this data includes graduates from AP and A-Level programs besides IBDP, it clearly reflects that the primary college admission pathway for IBDP students is overseas. Similarly, Alcanta International College, which offers only the IBDP, reported that 80% of its 200 graduates in 2020 were admitted to top 50 global universities, with over 40% entering top 30 institutions [18].

Chinese universities currently show limited interest in and development of the IBDP, with virtually no institutions accepting IB scores for domestic admissions. This contrasts sharply with the global landscape, where over 5000 universities in more than 100 countries recognize the IBDP diploma, including top institutions like Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Yale, and Stanford. Beyond admission advantages, IB students achieving high scores in HL subjects can earn college credits upon enrollment. Given the IB program's high challenge level, it attracts academically superior students and produces graduates with cross-cultural awareness and independent thinking skills. The complete migration of these graduates to overseas universities signifies not only a talent drain but also a capital loss. While some return after studying abroad, many remain overseas, and the outflow of educational investment is irrecoverable. A significant portion of Chinese middle-class family savings is invested in their children's education, with annual overseas study costs ranging from RMB 200,000 to 500,000. According to the 2020 Chinese Students Abroad White Paper, the total number of Chinese students studying overseas in 2019 reached 890,000 [19], incurring substantial tuition and living expenses, indicating a significant capital outflow.

To prevent the loss of talent and capital, China could draw on reform experiences from other countries by encouraging domestic universities to recognize IBDP diplomas and open admission pathways. Japan has used IB assessment results as a university admission criterion since 1979. In recent years, an increasing number of Japanese universities have recognized the IB program's positive impact on fostering critical thinking, leadership, and cross-cultural skills, using the IBDP diploma as an admission basis. Similarly, South Korea's government and policymakers have grown increasingly attentive to IB development. Long criticized for its overly competitive, exam-oriented education system, South Korea has implemented reforms under pressure, with the IB program gaining attention as a reference for college entrance exam reform, dubbed a "new remedy" [20]. Some South Korean universities have introduced special admission processes, recognizing IBDP courses and admitting qualified graduates. Although most students still take the university entrance exam, the reformed policy has made IBDP a recognized admission pathway, preventing all top IBDP graduates from flowing to overseas

institutions.

4. Imbalance between International and National Education

Another noteworthy issue in the IBDP's implementation is how to balance global citizenship education with national citizenship and patriotic education. The IBDP curriculum relies on imported foreign textbooks, primarily taught in English. To meet the standards set by top global universities and secure admission, educators and students may directly adopt or fully accept the international curriculum's knowledge system and values, often neglecting or abandoning the study of national culture, ultimately leading to a loss of national identity. Given that the IBDP curriculum focuses on global and universal issues, it significantly undervalues national history and cultural education, posing a notable risk. National citizenship education plays a crucial role in shaping students' sense of identity, and its absence is likely to impact their national identity. To establish ethnic identity and cultural pride, there is an urgent need to address gaps in the IBDP curriculum by incorporating national and ethnic history and cultural education, enabling young people to learn about China's rich history and traditions, thereby enhancing cultural confidence and national identity.

The IBDP's goal of nurturing "global citizens" with cross-cultural abilities may conflict with national education, prompting scholarly debate. For instance, Brett Bowden (2003, p. 360) argues that global citizenship lacks legal affiliation with any nation, offering no legal protections or social benefits. Without a legitimate government providing safeguards, passports, or identity proof, a stateless individual cannot enter any country. As Bowden notes, "Ultimately, global citizenship neither transcends nor supersedes the nation-state... Cosmopolitan, post-national aspirations depend on a nation's ability to provide a secure framework for its citizens; without this, cosmopolitan claims cannot stand" [21] (p. 360). Peterson also suggests an inherent tension between global citizenship education and patriotic education, asserting that national identity and patriotism are necessary, with national and world citizenship being complementary rather than mutually exclusive [22] (2003, pp. 194-199).

Global or cross-cultural identity may presuppose a foundation of national and cultural identity. Thus, integrating national culture and history into the IBDP curriculum becomes a critical issue. At the national level, education concerns the inheritance of ethnic culture and values. A key prerequisite for education aimed at "world citizenship" is not abandoning national sovereignty and identity goals—a concern not unique to China but a focus of educational policies worldwide. Take the USA, with the highest number of IBDP schools, as an example. In 2015, President Obama enacted the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), emphasizing the importance of American history and constitutional education to enhance citizens' cultural and national identity. Under the ESSA, the U.S. federal government provides targeted funding "to establish American history and civics education, and other activities aimed at improving education in American history, civics, and government" [23]. This act underscores the significance of American history, cul-

ture, and civic education, stating that “American history stories connect students with our nation’s past.” It lists recommended texts for grades 9 - 12, such as American Government and Politics Today (Ford *et al.*), Making America: A History of the United States (Carol Berkin *et al.*), Portrait of America (Oates, Errico), and Voices of the American Past (Hyser, Arndt) [24], as core middle school curricula [25]. These materials deepen students’ understanding of American geography, history, culture, and politics, strengthening their national and civic identity.

In contrast, IBDP programs in mainland China primarily follow the IB core curriculum, with humanities subjects limited to geography and global politics, which focus on globalization and lack Chinese history and culture. Since the IBDP involves six subjects, most mainland IBDP schools rely on international textbooks, with local curricula often restricted to physical education, making it difficult to balance international and national education. To address the absence of national cultural education, China could adopt the U.S. approach by designating relevant textbooks or readings as required materials. The integration of national education with IB philosophy can be achieved by creating a curriculum where students meet CNC requirements (e.g., Gaokao readiness, cultural literacy) while gaining IBDP benefits (critical thinking, international recognition). Practically, it’s implemented via subject mapping, core enhancement, and teacher training. Additionally, it could follow Japan’s example by integrating national citizenship and patriotic education into IBDP subjects. During implementation, extremes of wholesale adoption or rejection should be avoided, favoring a rational approach to balance global citizenship education with national citizenship education.

5. Conclusion

In summary, while the IBDP has experienced rapid global growth and produced outstanding graduates admitted to top universities worldwide, its implementation in China reflects elitist tendencies, severe graduate loss, and incomplete curriculum design. To address these issues, China can learn from other countries’ experiences by integrating advanced teaching philosophies through policy support, providing funding to economically disadvantaged regions and public schools to introduce IBDP courses and assessment methods. To prevent the loss of national citizenship education, educational authorities could incorporate national citizenship and patriotic education into IBDP curricula. Regarding college admission pathways, some mainland universities could experiment with opening admission channels for outstanding IBDP graduates, thereby retaining talent and educational capital. Universities could accept IBDP scores (out of 45 points) as an alternative credential, mapping them to Gaokao equivalents (e.g., 36+ points \approx 600+ Gaokao points). This creates a parallel track, reducing sole reliance on Gaokao performance.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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