

Oxford University Research: “IB Students Appear to Hold an Advantage When it Comes to Critical Thinking”

University of Oxford research shows International Baccalaureate students demonstrate stronger critical thinking skills.

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Evidence from the University of Oxford

finds International Baccalaureate (IB) students exhibit significantly stronger critical thinking skills than non-IB peers. In today’s rapidly changing world, schools seek ways to teach students skills needed for success beyond the classroom. Previous studies indicate that critical thinking skills are key determinants of individual and collective success, which is why these skills are sought after by students, parents, schools and universities.



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Dr. Therese Hopfenbeck

More than 560 students from eight schools in Australia, England and Norway participated in this study that examines the impact of the IB’s Diploma Programme (DP) on students’ critical thinking abilities. No previous research has taken this approach of comparing DP and non-DP students across the globe, using a validated critical thinking assessment.

The year-long IB-commissioned study was conducted by the Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment (OUCEA). The quantitative results show that the DP students possess significantly higher levels of critical thinking skills than their non-DP counterparts, an advantage that held even after relevant covariates were controlled for using regression approaches and propensity score-matching. Additionally, as students advanced through the DP, critical thinking skills increased and further distinguished them from their non-DP counterparts.

Following a review of the DP curriculum, OUCEA’s analysis indicated that the IB’s approach to developing critical thinking is in line with evidence-based best practice. Both individual DP



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courses and unique components of the DP curriculum, such as the theory of knowledge (TOK) course, offer opportunities for developing critical thinking skills.

“I feel like our students end up maybe more rounded than other students would, just because we, we kind of facilitate both sides and thinking about things from different perspectives and then coming up with their own validated conclusions. And I think that's a very valuable part of the course”, Environment systems and society teacher, England.

In addition to TOK, the extended essay was highlighted by students as shaping critical thinking development in the IB. Students and educators both further commented on the advantage that the DP offers as preparation for further studies when compared to national curriculums.

“While we can't know for certain whether IB participation improves critical thinking, it is noteworthy that, even after controlling for many pre-existing differences, IB students appear to hold an advantage when it comes to critical thinking. The findings suggest that instructional approaches that focus on teaching critical thinking skills explicitly as well as embedding opportunities for students to think critically within each subject may facilitate the development of critical thinking skills. IB students and teachers have identified many potential avenues by which the IB encourages the development of critical thinking and hopefully in the future we can build an even clearer picture of how to improve students' critical thinking skills”, commented Dr. Therese Hopfenbeck, lead researcher on the project.□

As part of the IB's continued curriculum innovation strategy, this research precedes a large project in collaboration with OUCEA, the Australian Council for Education Research (ACER) and the Jacobs Foundation, which aims to identify and share classroom practices that support the development of IB learner profile attributes, skills that foster international-mindedness in young people.

Dr. Hopfenbeck and her team at OUCEA will be presenting their research on critical thinking at the IB Virtual Conference. For more information about the research or regarding interest in attending the discussion, please contact Dan Rene at daniel.rene@kglobal.com.□

Founded in 1968, the International Baccalaureate (IB) pioneered a movement of international education, and now offers four high quality, challenging educational programmes to students aged 3-19. The IB gives students distinct advantages by providing strong foundations, critical thinking skills, and a proficiency for solving complex problems, while encouraging diversity, curiosity, and a healthy appetite for learning and excellence. In a world where asking the right questions is as important as discovering answers, the IB champions critical thinking and flexibility in study by crossing disciplinary, cultural and national boundaries. Supported by world class educators and coordinators, the IB currently engages with more than 1.4 million students in over 5,300 schools across 158 countries. To find out more, please visit www.ibo.org.

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Summarized from The effect of the Diploma Programme (DP) on critical thinking development: An international multi-site evaluation by Hopfenbeck, T. (University of Oxford), Double K. (University of Oxford), El Masri, Y. (University of Oxford), McGrane, J. (University of Oxford) et al. Copyright 2020. Published by the International Baccalaureate Organization. All rights reserved. To learn more read the [research summary](#) or [full report](#).

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