

To IB or not to IB

This really is the question



British International School

Since 1968 the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma programme has been growing in importance in over 180 countries around the world, including the UK. In 2009 there were 1969 IB schools and at the current rate of 10% growth per year, the IB is planning to work with 10000 schools and over 2.5 million students by 2020. The IB has been in the Russian Federation since 1994. The Diploma programme is challenging, and demands a desire to learn from the student. For many parents there are a number of important questions which need to be answered, such as what are the advantages of studying on this programme, do these outweigh the difficulties? Edward Parker, the IB coordinator at the British International School, Moscow talks to Passport on this very subject.

Interview by John Harrison

How long have you been in Moscow, and how long have you been teaching at the British international School?

I've been in Moscow since 1994 and have spent most of this time in Russia. I've also worked as a secondary school teacher in the UK. I've been at the British International School since September 2003 as a teacher of German as a foreign language, and since September 2009, as the IB Diploma coordinator here. Before then I was working a lot with IB students as the IB Creativity, Action and Service coordinator.

The British International School made a very bold decision in 2004; to abandon 'A' levels. Why?

It was a complicated step, but one that we felt suited our students. I don't know

if you are aware or not, but every year in August we read the same headlines in the British papers about 'A' level standards falling. We talk about "grade inflation". One hears the grumble: "when I was at school, things were much more difficult" and so on. Confidence in 'A' levels has been falling year after year for quite a long time. 'A' level course teachers suffer from interference from national government, some of it benign, some of it less so. IB is completely free from this "help". IB is based on many national programmes, but not dependant on any one. IB is based in Geneva, with the operations base in Cardiff, UK with offices all around the world, but they are not dependant on some politician who one year might decide against a second foreign language post-fourteen, and the next year decide that everyone has to study a foreign language in primary school.

Surely parents in Moscow who want to give their children a British education want that certain 'Britishness' associated with 'A' levels?

Sixteen-year-olds are not ready to decide what they are going to be doing for the rest of their lives. This British idea of being either in the Arts or the Sciences doesn't exist elsewhere in the world. Solzhenitsyn was a mathematician, Bulgakov was a doctor. These people didn't think that they had to be good either at natural sciences or in literature. And that's the type of student that we are trying to foster in this school, students who can speak at least one foreign language, students who study maths and science until eighteen. Everyone gets the chance. I did economics, French and German 'A' levels, I only wish that

I would have had a science that I could have combined with my languages.

But now you can do more than three 'A' levels?

People in Britain tend to do four or five subjects in what we call year 12, and they would probably take that down to three or four subjects in year thirteen, the 'A' level year. What does that really mean? They are stressed right from the beginning; they are doing exams in year twelve. They are being prepared for the tests by teachers who are thinking about league tables and so on.

I've heard that because IB is holistic it does not give students as much in-depth study as with 'A' levels?

Mathematically, you would think that this should be true, and this is how a lot of university admissions officers perceive it. They think: if someone is working hard to do four 'A' levels, how can it be if somebody is doing six subjects, that they can be academically challenged in all of them? I can say as a German teacher, that Higher Level IB German is much more difficult than 'A' level German, and Standard Level German is probably about the same as 'A' level German. There may be slightly fewer topics at standard level that need to be covered than at 'A' level, but that is a standard level subject. Students do three subjects at Higher Level and three at Standard Level. So there will be at least three of the six subjects where they will be challenged at least as much, or in my humble opinion, even more than they would be at 'A' Level.

Perhaps IB is too difficult? How many students get through the course percentage-wise?

The question should perhaps be: how many people get the full diploma, not just complete the certificate course. It is possible to get a certificate in every single subject you do, but you won't get the full Diploma. We offer the full Diploma programme at this school. This is difficult. Apart from the six subjects; they also have to write an extended essay and to take part in community service. In terms of numbers, we started off with eleven students in 2004, and as with every new programme, we had our teething problems; trying to get teachers who used to be 'A' level students to become IB teachers. Out of these first eleven students, three received the diploma. With-

