

## Creating an International Baccalaureate Student-friendly National University in Japan

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The number of International Baccalaureate (IB) students applying to Japanese Universities is increasing. Okayama University is a Super Global Japanese National University which started IB admissions since 2012 and presently, has 36 IB students in 11 faculties and 1 special program. Through IB student support, IB research and conducting surveys, Okayama University is aiming to become an IB friendly University. Twenty college counselors from International Schools and First Article schools in Japan, filled out a survey anonymously, regarding the following topics; expectations of Japanese National Universities; disappointing aspects of Japanese National University Admission policies; suggestions to improve existing admission policies; reasons behind IB students choosing Foreign Universities over Japanese Universities or choosing Private Universities over National Universities, respectively. Lack of understanding of the IB education system, leading to unrealistic expectations of IB students, was a major concern among all college counselors. Unfamiliarity with overseas admission policies regarding age at admission, language requirements, IB credit transfers and recognition of the IB Diploma, led IB students to opt for foreign Universities. Finally, Japanese Private Universities with admission policies similar to overseas Universities, offering a wide range of study options, are prioritized over National Universities, irrespective of high tuition fees. Multiple approaches are necessary to become an IB-friendly University. A clear understanding of the IB education system which is very different from Japanese High School education, is essential. Okayama University is making every effort towards balancing the needs of IB students with the expectations of Japanese University teachers to become more IB friendly.

**Key words:** International Baccalaureate, Japanese National University, Admission Policies

## INTRODUCTION

The International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) is a non-profit organization which was established in Geneva, Switzerland in 1968, and which introduced an internationally recognized pre-college curriculum to reform education and nurture global citizens with leadership skills (Hill and Saxton, 2014). Japan's initiative to internationalize its young generation and prepare them for a more competent globalized world, can be best achieved through higher education reform (Yonezawa 2015). In 1979, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), officially recognized the International Baccalaureate Diploma (IBDP) program equivalent to Japanese high school graduation. In 2014, MEXT, introduced the Super Global University (SGU) project and selected 37 top Universities to receive financial aid for the reformation of their present university educational system, in compliance with global trends (Iwasaki 2013 and Sanders 2018). Okayama University was selected, with the aim of developing into a role model global university, stimulating cooperation with top world universities and fostering innovative approaches, for global competitiveness. Okayama University was the first National University in Japan, to establish the IBDP admission policy in which, IB students were exempted from the National University Entrance Examination or any other written exams, for admission into the undergraduate course. From welcoming its first IB student in 2012, to presently hosting 36 IB students in 11 faculties and 1 special program, Okayama University has come a long way towards building an IB friendly National University in Japan. With a strong IB student support system, faculty education and extensive research on the IB education system (Mahmood 2016, Mahmood 2017) to familiarize IB in Japanese Higher Education, Okayama University is considered a pioneer in IB admissions among other Japanese National Universities. Through regular visits to IB schools at home and abroad, Okayama University has also formed a friendly network with IB school college counselors (CC), who play a very important role in the smooth transition of IB graduates into higher education. This research survey is a part of an initiative to summarize the suggestions and opinions of CC regarding the difficulties IB students face with University admission policies and Japanese education systems, and find ways to reform present admission policies, based on IB student needs.

## SURVEY METHOD

This research study used a survey method. Participants of this survey included 20 college counselors (CC) from various International Schools and First Article schools in Japan. The purpose of the survey was explained to each CC in advance and all CC were reassured that names of IB schools and CC would be kept strictly confidential, and would not be revealed anywhere in the document. Individual surveys were collected via email, over a period of 6 months between October 2017 and March 2018.

### **Instrument: Survey Questionnaire**

The questionnaire was divided into 5 major questions where CC were given the liberty to express their opinions freely, and were encouraged to give actual facts, that would help the survey be more transparent and form the main crux of this research. No Likert-type scale used to summarize each response. Rather than statistical significance, this survey aimed at summarizing responses by experienced CC who had real experiences with IB student admissions at Japanese and Foreign Universities.

## SURVEY FINDINGS

In the first question, CC were asked about the kind of IB admission policies that IB students, parents and CC expect from Japanese Universities. (Table 1). Almost 100% CC emphasized the need to abolish Center Tests as admission requirements for IB Diploma graduates. Every CC expressed concern that, if only Japanese University Admission policy makers had a good

understanding of the IB program before admitting IB students, they would ask for more unreasonable IB Diploma scores and individual IB subject scores. About 80% CC hoped that not only English based programs but, all University faculties would accept IB graduates, recognize the IB Certificate, have clear and concise guidelines, be more transparent about IB admissions and provide conditional offers based on predicted scores. In addition to the above, about 50% CC emphasized the need for a good IB student support system, a “One stop application system” like UCAS in the UK, proper assessment of IB scores and CAS, and a clearer understanding of the “critical thinking and discussion skills” of IB students. Last but not least, many CC encouraged Universities to offer accommodation for IB students and assure campus safety, which was often a big deciding factor particularly for parents of IB students who lived abroad.

**Table 1 Suggestions for IB-friendly Japanese National University Admission Policies**

Expectations	Fulfilled by Okayama University
No Center Test or additional Tests for IB Students	☑
Recognize the IB Diploma as an entrance qualification	☑
All Faculties accept IB graduates	☑
Reasonable IB Diploma score requirements	☑
Reasonable scores for individual IB subjects	
IB student support system	☑
Good understanding about the IB	☑
Clear and concise guidelines	☑
Transparent Admission policies	☑
Condition offers based on predicted scores	
Campus safety	☑
Understanding “critical thinking and discussion” skills	※
Proper assessment of IB scores and CAS	※
Accommodation for all IB students	※
Transfer of IB credits	X
One stop application system like UCAS in UK	X
Recognize the IB certificate	X

※ Changes Okayama University is still trying to make

X Changes that Okayama University cannot make alone as a National University

In question 2, CC were asked about some disappointing aspects of Japanese University Admission policies, which they have come across in the past (Table 2). Most CC felt that Medical schools across Japan, demand too high IB Diploma scores (39-42) as a minimum requirement for application. In addition, lack of understanding of the IB education system, the IB Diploma course and the IB scoring system by University Admissions, were ongoing hurdles. A few CC expressed disappointment about some Universities that divided IB students based on passports, which caused confusion among IB students coming from intercultural backgrounds and having two passports. Another, very unrealistic, almost impossible requirement that IB students were often asked to meet was, taking all or most subjects in higher level (HL), particularly Mathematics. Other dissatisfactions included, unclear language requirements, complicated admission policies, unnecessary document requirements, inconvenient application timing for IB students (during IB exams), strict age requirement of 18 years at admission (as some IB graduates are much younger) and inflexible conditional offers with little or no knowledge of IB admissions worldwide.

**Table 2 Disappointing aspects of Admission Policies at Japanese National Universities**

Disappointments	Revised by Okayama University
Too high diploma scores such as "42" as admission requirement	☑
Insufficient or no understanding about the IB	☑
Lack of understanding about the IB diploma scoring system	☑
Dividing students based on passports	☑
Unrealistic expectations of IB Students	☑
Unclear Japanese language requirements	☑
Accepting Mathematics in HL only	☑
Too complicated Admission policies	☑
Inconvenient application periods for IB Students	☑
Inflexible conditional offers	✖
Unfamiliar with overseas admission policies	✖
Age requirement at admission 18 years or older	✖
✖ Changes Okayama University is still trying to make	
X Changes that Okayama University cannot make alone as a National University	
HL: Higher Level;	

For question 3, CC were asked to give their valuable suggestions regarding ways to improve the existing IB Admission Policies at Japanese Universities (Table 3). Suggestions from CC included, making clearer IB admission guidelines, specifying subjects required in HL or standard level (SL), educating university faculty about the IB, adding interviews for students with IB DP scores of 24 or less, allowing smooth transfer of IB credits, providing incentives for IB students with a diploma score of over 40 (such as scholarships or fee waivers), having fixed IB diploma score requirements for each faculty and acknowledging the fact that there is a difference between the Japanese dual language and full English IB programs.

**Table 3 Suggestions for improving existing Admission Policies at Japanese National Universities**

Suggestions	Revised by Okayama University
Clearer Admission Guidelines	☑
Clearer specifications of subjects required in HL or SL	☑
Train faculty about IB admissions	☑
Interview IB students for IB diploma scores of 24	**☑
Clearer distinctions between the Full English and the Dual Language IB	✖
Allow transfer of IB credits	X
Incentives for students with IB diploma scores 40 or above	X
Fixed IB diploma score requirements for each Faculty	X
One stop application system like UCAS for all IB students	X
✖ Changes Okayama University is still trying to make	
X Changes that Okayama University cannot make alone as a National University	
HL: Higher Level; SL: Standard Level; **Dept. of Education and the Medical School require interviews	

In answer to question 4 regarding which factors affect the choice of Foreign Universities over Japanese Universities among students (Table 4), CC listed about 10 main differences between Foreign and Japanese Universities which led to IB graduates choosing foreign universities over national universities. They included, English being the language of instruction, family influence, better job opportunities abroad, tuition fee waivers and attractive scholarships, worldwide university reputation, diversity of student body, college education similar to the IB, compatibility of college academic year starting dates with the IB, flexibility of academic choices and vast research opportunities, respectively. However, CC also mentioned 3 major factors

why some IB students and parents preferred Japanese National Universities, which included over all costs, overall safety and licensed professions in Japan.

**Table 4 Why IB students choose Foreign Universities over Japanese National Universities**

	FU	JNU
Language of instruction:	English	Japanese
Family Influence	Parents are foreigners	Parents are Japanese
Overseas Job Opportunities	Better	Fewer
Tuition Fee waivers/ Scholarships	For Students with high DP score	Difficult
University Reputation	Worldwide	In Japan only
Diverse student body	All Universities	Depends on location
IB-like education	Similar	Completely different
Academic choices	Vast	Limited
Research opportunities	Vast	Depends on University
Overall cost	Very Expensive	Reasonable
Overall safety	Variable	Very safe
Licensed job opportunities	Very Limited	Many in Japan

FU: Foreign University; JNU: Japanese National University; DP: diploma Program

Finally in answer to the final question regarding which factors affect the choice of Private Universities over National Universities (Table 5), CC listed 8 main differences. They included, lesser requirement of academic competency, vast choices of classes in English, absence of entrance exams in most private universities, active alumni network, globalized admission policies, campus environment, extensive size of international programs and many English speaking faculty. The two major reasons for choosing national universities over private universities was the overall cost and greater possibilities of getting employment at Japanese local and multinational companies.

**Table 5 Why IB students choose Private Universities over Japanese National Universities**

	PU	JNU
Academic competency	Easier	Tough
English programs	Vast	Few
Entrance exam	None /Easier	Difficult
Alumni network	Very active	Passive
Globalized admission policy	Very similar	Very different
Campus environment	Many foreign students	Limited foreign students
Size of International programs	Extensive	Limited
English speaking faculty	Many	Few
Research opportunities	Vast	Depends on University
Overall cost	Very Expensive	Reasonable
Licensed job opportunities	Very Limited	Many in Japan

FU: Foreign University; JNU: Japanese National University;

## DISCUSSION

In order to become IB friendly, University representatives cannot overlook the important role of college counselors (CC), who have infinite knowledge about colleges all over the world, including admission processes, application deadlines, entrance requirements, University Courses, percentage of acceptances, housing, dorms and extracurricular activities. They are also very well informed about IB student capabilities, weaknesses, grades, parent's expectations and the financial situations of individual IB student families. Their multiple

activities include arranging university visits, recommending students to universities, counseling students, and providing the best possible University options that students can choose from. Their knowledge about student backgrounds and student characteristics, enables them to make important recommendations appropriate for each student.

In the present survey, all CC were disappointed with the fact that many Japanese Universities do not recognize the IB Diploma as a qualification for college entrance, and additionally imposes the Center Test or other entrance exams. Since the IB Diploma is an internationally recognized certification, accepted by most universities worldwide, it is only natural that Japanese Universities aiming to internationalize (Ninomiya et al, 2009) should consider such important admission qualifications (Yamamoto et al 2017). Okayama University stands out in Japan, as one of the very few National Universities, following global University trends, and accepting IBDP students without imposing any kind of admission tests. This is because Okayama University has a clear understanding of the IB Diploma Program. Regarding setting reasonable IB Diploma scores as a requirement for admission and recognizing the IB Certificate, the minimum IB Diploma score requirement to apply at Okayama University has is 24, in 10 out of 11 faculties. Besides that, the special program “Discovery Program for Global Learners” (Discovery 2018) accepts both IB certificates and the IB Diploma. Even though the admission guidelines at Okayama University are clear and concise, Okayama University regularly receives feedbacks from IB schools, students, parents and CC through networking, and updates and simplifies admission policies to accommodate IB students, which includes providing better conditional offers and accepting predicted scores. Okayama University is the only University in Japan, which has a unique support system for IB student entrants, consisting of an IB advisor, who keeps in touch with IB students, listens to their voices, caters to IB student needs and connects IB students to the University as a whole. Feedback from IB students, CC and parents have been very positive towards this effort and Okayama University intends to continue strengthening this support system, which is helping to bridge the gap between IB student expectations towards the university and the University expectations of IB students. In this survey, the biggest disappointment regarding Japanese University Admission policies for IB admissions from CC, seemed to be the lack of understanding of the IB education system. In order to accommodate students from a completely different educational background, it is necessary that University Admission policy makers know clearly about the IBDP curriculum, the difference between IB subjects taken in HL and SL, IB assessment methods, IB scoring systems, exam timings and age at graduation of the IB Diploma. Therefore, it is very important for Japanese Universities, to pay close attention to the suggestions put forward by CC and try to solve such problems. Since 2012, Okayama University has been educating faculty through attending and arranging IB educational conferences and workshops, publication of IB research papers (Mahmood 2017), networking with IB college counselors and learning hands on from enrolled IB student experiences (Mahmood 2016). With this proactive attitude, and through ongoing discussions feedbacks from surveys, Okayama University is making every effort to cater to the needs of IB students. Nevertheless, as a National University, and abiding by rules set forth by MEXT, there are limitations to the changes that can be made immediately, but continuous efforts are being made to improve admission policies in favor of IB students.

According to CC, foreign universities worldwide have a better understanding about the IB education system, offer scholarships and fee waivers based on IB student merit, and offer a wider variety of subject options and research opportunities (Bergeron 2015 and Conley 2014). While this seems a very lucrative choice for IB students in Japan aiming to work overseas, it can also be very expensive for parents of IB students who are completely dependent on private funds. Moreover, student safety issues and parental desires for their children to become licensed professionals in Japan, divert student minds towards Japanese Universities. IB

students who decide to pursue their higher education in Japan, need to choose between a National and Private University. Although Private Universities are expensive compared to National Universities, IB students who are financially secured, tend to go towards Private Universities for their globalized admission policies, extensive size of International programs, a large number of English speaking faculty, and in some cases, less requirement of academic competency or absence of entrance exams. However, some IB students and parents think National Universities are more credible institutions, focused on learning, with very low tuition fees and provide a wider platform for better job opportunities at local Japanese and multinational companies.

### CONCLUSION

The IB education system is still very new in Japan and quite different from the traditional Japanese high school education system. For many years, Japanese National Universities have hosted a majority of undergraduate students who were mainly Japanese high school graduates. The few foreign students who came from a different educational background and enrolled into undergraduate programs, were expected to adapt to the existing Japanese University education system. However, when IB admissions into Japanese National Universities took off, it was not about just going global, but it also meant a better understanding of a different kind of an international educational system. Okayama University is leading the way as a pioneer for IB student admissions at Japanese National Universities. Although many changes need to come into effect to become more IB friendly, Okayama University will continue efforts to revise IB admission policies and encourage other National Universities to follow suit.

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