

# WHY S'PORE EXCELS IN IB EXAMS

Singapore students once again came out tops in the International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma exams, according to results released last week, outshining their global peers. **The Sunday Times** finds out why students here do so well in the two-year pre-university programme that Singapore joined in 2005, whether tuition and drilling play a part in their success, and how the IB prepares them for university and life.



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Singapore students came out tops in the latest International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma results released last Monday, outshining their global peers.

Of the 99 students worldwide who attained the perfect score of 45 points in the exam last November, more than half – 55 – were from schools in Singapore.

Ever since it joined the two-year pre-university programme in 2005, the Republic has surpassed global standards, consistently producing more than half of the top scorers worldwide at the IB's November sitting.

Singapore accounted for 35 of 69 perfect scorers globally in 2019's November session. The year before, the figure was 38 out of 68.

Only a handful of local schools – Anglo-Chinese School (Independent), or ACS(I); St Joseph's Institution (SJI); School of the Arts Singapore (Sota); and Singapore Sports School – offer the IB Diploma Programme (IBDP).

Students in the international school arms of ACS, SJI and Hwa Chong also take the IB. The latest addition is Madrasah Aljunied Al-Islamiah, which saw its first batch of 25 students start the IBDP in 2019.

In total, 28 institutions in Singapore, including international schools like the Overseas Family School, offer the IB programme.

## WHY SINGAPORE ACES THE IB

One reason students here tend to fare well in the IB is that some of the schools that offer the programme take in better students to begin with, observers said.

National Institute of Education don Jason Tan said: "There's an entrenched culture of wanting to do well in exams in Singapore. We're talking about the more prestigious schools where, early, all of the students are already highly motivated academically."

"That carries over whether you're in the A-level or IB track, because you know that at the end of the programme, you are gunning for university access, and students would be very focused on that."

SJI principal Adrian Danker said students come into the IB programme with strong academic foundations, whether from the Integrated Programme or the O-level track. "It gives them a head start and allows them to go deep into the different subjects."

A growing enrichment industry could also be a factor in students' success in the IB.

Tuition centre IB Super has had a 30 per cent increase in local IB students in the past four years, while another centre, Mindlab International, has seen a 20 per cent year-on-year increase in enrolment of local IB students in the past five years.

Mr Matthew Lee, Mindlab's programme director, said: "Most of the students come to get coaching in exam preparation and brushing up on important topics."

Tuition centre Quintessential Education said it has recorded a nearly threefold increase in the number of local IB students in the past five years.

Mr Sean Lim, one of its tutors, said: "We notice that local students often ask for help in the coursework component – for instance, in research methodology, application of academic theories or framing and generating arguments."

Despite the uptick in IB tuition, IB Super's founder Bel Hwang said local schools also provide strong foundations for their students.

She cited ACS(I)'s Integrated Programme, which prepares students in the first four years for the IBDP, and a similar integrated arts and academic curriculum at Sota.

"Our local students are generally industrious and focused on meeting the numerous deadlines in IB schoolwork. They are also grade-conscious, and always do their work with an eye on their expected grades," she said.

Dr Yuen Wei Hao, director of studies for another tuition centre, EIB Education, reiterated the point that local schools which offer IB "typically have stronger cohorts of students... compared with the national average, as well as good support from the schools, both in terms of the subject teaching and how to approach subject selection".

About 20 per cent of sign-ups each year at his centre come from IB students at local schools. However, teachers said the IB curriculum does not allow for drilling, and doing well requires deep and critical thinking.

Mr Tang Woh Un, SJI's IBDP coordinator, said: "There is no 10-year series for IB. Exam questions aren't repeated and do not encourage memory work."

"Knowing facts without real understanding won't get you anywhere. It's more about application of concepts to get solutions."

Mr Jarett Kan, ACS(I)'s director of affective curriculum, which covers student development and well-being, said: "We expose students to different types of exam questions, and they do practise. But there are so many permutations of questions, and no model answers. "There's also greater emphasis



Madrasah Aljunied Al-Islamiah student Abdul Hakam Nor Razak, 18, was part of the madrasah's pioneer batch in the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme. He scored 42 points out of the maximum 45. PHOTO: MUIS

## Madrasah student scores high in IB despite juggling it with Islamic studies

**Jolene Ang**

As a student at the Madrasah Aljunied Al-Islamiah, Abdul Hakam Nor Razak had to take 10 subjects as part of the Islamic curriculum at the religious school.

On top of that, he was enrolled in the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP). Early last week, the 18-year-old was one of 25 students in the

madrasah who received their IB results. They are the pioneer batch in this programme, which began in January 2019.

Even while juggling it with his Islamic education, Hakam managed to score 42 points out of the maximum 45. He was the madrasah's top scorer.

The IB curriculum consists of six subjects and three core components – namely theory of knowledge, an extended essay, and creativity, activity and service.

In this last component, students have to complete a project related to those three concepts. Hakam's six chosen subjects were chemistry, mathematics, Arabic, English, Malay literature and politics.

On how he did so well, he said: "I enjoy learning and studying isn't a chore for me."

"During the holidays, I read up about science and maths, which supplemented my knowledge about the subjects."

He also has a keen interest in politics and English. He frequently reads news articles and keeps track of global affairs.

But juggling the IBDP and his Islamic education was not easy, he said. Over the two years, most school days started at 7.30am and ran till 5pm.

While he has completed the IBDP, his Islamic classes have not ended. He still has about two months of school left.

Hakam said he was initially anxious at the thought of being part of the madrasah's pioneer IBDP batch.

"We had no seniors to talk to and seek advice from, and I was also quite anxious about the school's preparedness for the programme – whether the teachers had the right training and whether I could get a good score."

The Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis) said the IBDP complements the school-based Islamic Studies curriculum.

"The learning experience, training, exposure, research and investigation rigour, as well as community service activities and engagements not only prepare students for university life but also the necessary thinking skills and perspectives," said Muis, adding that these are critical for future religious scholars and leaders.

Having completed the programme, Hakam said he likes that students' grades in the IBDP are not solely based on their final exams.

He added: "We also have assignments that are kind of like a mini thesis, where we have to research on something and do a write-up on it."

"The IB allows us to explore our areas of interest independently, and it was something I enjoyed."

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Singapore Sports School graduate Nicholas Rachmadi, 19, was able to spread out his International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme coursework and exam schedule according to his sports commitments. The triathlete spent three years instead of the usual two years on the IB route. PHOTO: SINGAPORE SPORTS SCHOOL

This follows the Education Ministry's practice of not releasing such information for other national examinations, in an effort to quell the fixation on academic results.

Father (Dr) Adrian said SJI chose the IB for its post-secondary track as its programme is in line with its Lasallian philosophy of developing character in students.

"This Singapore obsession about perfect scores worries me, because it puts extreme pressure on students and parents," he said.

"With all the extra components, the IB aims to nurture qualities like becoming a better person, and that's what education is about."

## LEARNING SKILLS FOR LIFE

While some students said they struggled initially with the independent style of learning in the IB programme, they adapted quickly.

SJI graduate Portia Lim, 18, said: "I felt like I was thrown into the deep end at first. I found the curriculum very challenging, and it requires you to be consistent, meeting back-to-back deadlines."

"But I chose the IB after speaking to seniors who said it would prepare me well for university, and I didn't want to do something simi-

## IB diploma and A levels: How the two routes differ

The International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) and the A levels are both two-year-long programmes that cater mainly to students between 16 and 18 years old.

In Singapore, more students tend to opt for the A-level route. In 2019, 12,405 students sat the national exam.

A-level students are graded almost entirely on their final exams, which tend to be content-heavy.

The IBDP is considered a less frequently chosen option. Last year, 2,228 students from Singapore, including those from schools such

as Anglo-Chinese School (Independent) and St Joseph's Institution (SJI), sat the diploma exam in November.

Each year, there is another sitting in May, taken mainly by international schools in Singapore.

In the IBDP, the final IB exams account for about 70 per cent to 80 per cent of the total mark for each subject, while assignments assessed by teachers and checked by external examiners contribute the rest of the final grade, according to a note on SJI's website.

The curriculum places emphasis on the research processes of the

students, as well as on their inquiry and problem-solving skills.

Other key external assessments are the theory of knowledge essay and the individual extended essay, which are completed by students over a specified period of time under teacher supervision.

Mr Sean Lim, a tutor at Quintessential Education, which offers tuition for IB students, said IB coverage is more extensive, but the final exams tend to be less challenging than the A levels.

"Children who are more exam-savvy might do better in the A-level exams... The IB exams bene-

fit students who are good at time management, independent learning and research," he said.

National Institute of Education don Jason Tan said one key difference between the two routes is that the IBDP mandates that students take a broader spread of subjects across disciplinary areas.

The A-level route requires students to take at least one contrasting subject. Many arts students tend to choose mathematics, while science students tend to choose economics, he said.

The IBDP has six subject groups: studies in language and literature;

language acquisition; individuals and societies; sciences; mathematics; and the arts. Students can choose courses from these six groups.

However, they may opt to study an additional sciences, individuals and societies, or languages course, instead of a course in the arts.

Associate Professor Tan said: "But even if you forgo the arts, you still have a spread across various fields. Compared with what A-level students take, it's a wider spread across at least five different subject areas."

**Jolene Ang**