

International learning routes and the international baccalaureate

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Towards the end of 2004, several national newspapers reported that the international baccalaureate (IB) would eventually be opened up to students in government-funded secondary education. The IB is a two-year course, developed in an international context, with a final examination at pre-university level. In the Netherlands, for the time being, enrolment in the IB is only open to those attending international schools. These schools are intended for children whose parents are mobile on an international scale, for instance employees working for international companies or institutions that temporarily set up in the Netherlands. The newspapers, however, have run considerably ahead of the facts. In November 2004, the Dutch Lower House did pass a motion aimed at opening up the IB to students in government-funded schools. The Minister, however, promptly reported she envisaged various drawbacks and indicated that the government would not implement the motion.

The Minister's position is quite understandable: a well-founded decision would require many questions and possible drawbacks to be outlined and weighed. What exactly is the IB? What kind of curriculum and examination does it have? How was the IB developed, who 'owns' the programme? What do we know of its quality level? What is the IB's formal position in Europe and the Netherlands? How do other countries approach the IB? As for opening up the programme to a broader group of pupils: do the facts that the IB courses are taught in English and are quite expensive, constitute an insuperable drawback? Does the IB programme properly prepare students for Dutch higher education? The Minister asked the Education Council for its opinion. The Council's advisory report outlines and explores both the practical drawbacks and the more fundamental drawbacks that could exist with regard to opening up the IB programme. In addition, the report aims to assess whether opening the IB to a broader target group would have an added value. The Council studied the questions on the IB in relation to other (existing and conceivable) international learning routes in the Netherlands.

Two recommendations

The analyses demonstrate that conceivable drawbacks relating to the language of instruction (English) and the alignment with higher education are not necessarily a decisive impediment for opening up the IB. The costs of enrolling in the IB are indeed high. However, in itself this should not hinder an expansion of the target group, provided certain conditions have been met. The owner of the IB (the International Baccalaureate Organisation, IBO) is formally responsible for the content and the quality of the IB programme. However, the Minister always has the final say in the decision of whether a government-funded (or accredited) school would be permitted to offer the IB programme. The Minister can withhold or withdraw her permission anytime. Nevertheless, the fundamental question still remains: does the Netherlands want to accommodate such an internationally developed curriculum within its own government-funded education system, and if so, in what manner? Does the fact that there is a demand for the IB among parents and students not mean that Dutch education is in itself not sufficiently international in scope?

The Council recommends the Minister to do two things:

- (1) Encourage the educational field and curriculum developers to come up with plans for a Dutch set of internationalized learning routes;
- (2) Pending these Dutch, international alternatives: open up the IB on a limited scale.

(1) Developing a set of internationalized learning routes

The debate on the IB demonstrates that it is high time to give some serious thought to international learning routes within our education system. Internationalizing is still in its infancy; the education system lacks a structural international dimension. The Council strongly advocates increased internationalization within education and also indicates that the government should focus on developing our own international variants.

To gain an idea of the options, the Council outlines four possible learning routes, ranging from highly international (the current international) schools to regular schools with a basic international dimension. As options for the longer term the council mentions the development of international variants of specific subjects, of an international profile (combination of subjects) in the second stage of HAVO/VWO [senior general secondary education / pre-university education], of an international learning route in VMBO [pre-vocational secondary education], and development of international variants of Dutch diplomas.

The Council advises the Minister to initiate a development programme which will encourage the establishment of internationalized learning routes. To start with, she might consider commissioning research into the variants that already exist and the variants that should be developed. The outcomes should be discussed with the educational field, to determine in what way the educational institutions and curriculum developers can work out the necessary details for these projects. In the ideal situation, each pupil or student will eventually be able to choose the international learning route that best suits him or her.

(2) Opening up the IB on a limited scale for the time being

Until the Dutch education system has developed its own international learning routes, there will be a demand for the IB. Therefore, it is the Council's opinion that expanding the target group for the IB would have a clear added value. For a small group of students, the IB is an interesting option. This group consists of students with a cosmopolitan attitude, who deliberately choose to keep their options for an international future open, and to pursue an international career. Schools and (parents of) pupils that are highly motivated to offer or, as the case may be, attend the IB, should be able to do so. Offering this latitude fits in with government policy focused on increased diversity, autonomy for schools and more freedom of choice for parents, pupils and students.

The IB is a high-quality programme and examination. It differs markedly from the current upper years of the HAVO/VWO (including bilingual schools) as it is fully international in scope. Pending the development of Dutch international learning routes, opening up the IB affords an opportunity for schools to focus more on talented pupils and students. However, the Council does consider opening up the IB primarily as a temporary option, until improvements in the Dutch education system result in sufficient international options.

Five conditions

A government-funded school can offer the IB-programme once five conditions have been met:

1) The school has acquired written permission from the Minister

There are several ways in which the Minister can regulate access to the IB. The law would only need to be amended if the IB is introduced in a structural manner and on a large scale. This is not what the Council envisages. The Education Council states two possible ways to regulate the opening up of the IB. Firstly, the Minister could issue a new policy regulation which governs exemption from the requirements of the WVO (Secondary Education Act). If so desired, the Minister could also use this regulation to stipulate that schools can offer the IB either in English only or in French and/or Spanish as well. Another possibility would be to expand the current policy regulation for internationally-oriented secondary education (IGVO) so that it would also accommodate the extended target group of students. Once the chosen regulation takes effect, schools can submit a written request to be allowed to offer the IB. The Minister will decide per school whether permission is granted. The Minister will always bear the final responsibility for the decision whether a school may continue to offer the IB. One of the factors underpinning this decision could be the opinion of the Education Inspectorate. If the quality of the education provided is insufficient, then the Minister may suspend government funding in the particular case.

2) The school has acquired a licence from the IBO

A school that wishes to offer the IB must acquire a licence from the IBO. To this end, the school will have to attract at least a sufficient number of English-speaking teachers and train them in the educational principles of the IB. The council therefore expects the schools wanting to offer the IB-programme will mainly be international schools and schools offering bilingual education.

3) The school has transparent selection criteria

The school must select students wishing to follow the IB on the basis of motivation, English language skills and Dutch language skills. Further admission requirements could include a HAVO certificate or a confirmation of promotion from the fourth year of VWO to the fifth. Schools can organise this selection themselves. The position of the parents could also be considered. The fact that parents are part of an international setting, e.g. if they are employed by a company operating on an international scale, does not by definition mean that their children qualify for a place at an international school. In the opinion of representatives from international schools and bilingual schools, with whom the Council has discussed the matter, as a rule, it is quite possible to indicate which students would be better off following the IB.

4) The school will maintain its regular HAVO-VWO department

A government-funded school that wishes to offer the IB must maintain its regular HAVO-VWO department, in order to enable students to transfer back if they need to. In addition, the school should provide a productive link between the two types of students and course programmes. This can be done by creating opportunities for the students to meet one another (school excursions, breaks, et cetera). Thus, all the students profit from the international setting and IB students are able to keep up their Dutch. The schools could also introduce positive aspects of the IB method into the regular course programme and vice versa, for instance by having teachers work in both departments.

5) The school takes part in an IB fund providing grants

The Council chooses not to use additional government funds to make it possible to open up the IB. Instead, the Council wants to replace the current additional funding for international schools (approximately 1049 euros per student per year) by a government contribution to school funds. These can be used to award IB grants to pupils from financially weak families. Both the current international pupils and pupils from the new category can apply for a (partial or full) grant. In order to minimize bureaucracy, groups of schools could join forces to create and manage an IB fund. In addition, the schools could encourage companies and employers to contribute to their fund. Having such a fund should be a precondition for a school wishing to offer the IB.