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The International Baccalaureate and its Diploma Programme online

The challenges and opportunities

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The International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO) celebrated its 40th Anniversary in 2008. Following almost four decades of rapid growth the IBO embarked on a strategic planning exercise in 2004. One outcome is that the IBO seeks to widen access to its Diploma Programme (IBDP), and one avenue being followed is online provision. There have been two pre-pilot IBDP Online (IBDPO) experiments involving six schools in five countries. September 2008 saw the start of a four-year pilot phase, involving initially 75 students from a minimum of 13 schools worldwide. The IBO has identified a potential demand in the future of about 6000 students. This article charts the development of the IBDPO project and offers an insight into three possible future scenarios and some of the key challenges likely to be faced.

KEYWORDS *diploma programme, distance learning, international baccalaureate, online learning*

Introduction

The growth of online distance learning was coming under scrutiny a decade and a half ago (Alavi, 1994), and it was being predicted then (Cantelon, 1995) that most higher education would soon take place off-campus through technological methods of delivery. Draves (2002) even predicted that by 2010, half of all learning in general would be done at a distance. It therefore seems strange to offer in this article the first discussion of online distance learning now emerging from a pre-higher education (HE) curriculum that is over 40 years old. The International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO), registered in Geneva in 1968, is currently part-way to offering online provision of its Diploma Programme (DP) for 16–19-year-olds.

The IBO has moved during the past four decades from being a niche player among a diverse group of educational institutions known as 'international schools', to offering the world's major and most well known international curriculum. It openly claims to be 'definitely the most international

programme on offer' (Seefried, 2005) and is seemingly unique among educational curricula in having at its core a challenging and idealistic Mission Statement: 'to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect'. The initial DP was joined in 1994 by a Primary Years Programme (PYP) and three years later by a Middle Years Programme (MYP), to form a 'continuum of international education' (IBO, 2002).

By November 2008 there were over 2400 schools in 131 countries offering a total of 2947 programmes, including 1793 at DP level. Well over 600,000 children in 2008 were undertaking one of the three IB programmes, and the latest projection is for this to rise to 2.5 million by 2020 (Beard, 2007). A major dilemma for the IBO has become one of ensuring this future growth yet without compromising its quality provision, or sense of idealistic mission. This task has been made even more demanding by the fact that the year 2008 saw the beginning of the pilot phase of the International Baccalaureate DP Online (IBDPO), which is intended to begin proper in 2012.

The acronym 'IBDPO' has not seemingly been formally agreed by the IBO, but will be used in this article for clarification purposes, amid a cluttering of other acronyms. This article discusses the IBDPO and its development over the past decade, and presents three possible scenarios. The IBO is engaging in online provision at a very slow and careful pace, which is not perhaps surprising amid the distractions of rapid growth and the desire to maintain quality provision. But the advent of online provision of the IBDP poses several challenges as well as opportunities, and these need discussing.

Historical context

The momentum behind the IBDPO seems different from that associated with other forms of distance learning. Parker (2003) concluded that many US colleges have adopted online learning for self-preservation purposes in a highly competitive market. However, this is not the case for the IBO, which still operates in a largely monopolistic environment. The movement behind the IBDPO is more connected with the sense that the IBO has grown and developed over the past four decades in such a way as to become relatively exclusive. The IBO now wishes to open up the IBDP to a wider audience. In a way, the IBO Mission Statement demands this. But this is a challenging proposition and one that may conflict with the desire to ensure quality provision.

The growth of the DP has been undeniably impressive, yet has never followed a 'careful pattern' (Walker, 2004). Commentators at the end of the 1990s talked of the DP entering a new phase of growth and development. Hayden and Wong (1997: 352), writing a decade ago when there were 500 schools in 70 countries, noted Hagoort's (1994: 1) claim that the DP had moved from 'being a programme for international schools, to being an international programme for schools'. Wallace (1999a: 22) stated the IB was entering a 'new era', having moved from a period of 'expansion' to one of 'consolidation'. The IBO hit the 1000 school-mark at this time and began considering its future growth and development, including the possibility of online distance learning.

The key impetus behind action came when the IBO Council of Foundation met in Bucharest in May 1999 and was 'given forthright advice' (Crafter, 1999) by two consultants that the IBO required greater strategic planning. The IB Director General made reference in an interview (Wallace, 1999b: 9) to a five-year strategic plan being created, and the plan that appeared the year after heavily involved giving the IBO an Internet presence (Wallace, 2001). Early in 2003, McKinsey & Company offered the IBO consultancy services to develop a new strategic plan, and this appeared in April 2004 (IBO, 2004). Significantly, although this had been very quick to appear, the number of IB schools had reached 2000, exactly double the number at the time of the first strategic plan. The 2004 strategic plan projected 1 million IB students by the year 2014. This figure was updated in 2007 to project 2.5 million students in 10,000 schools by 2020.

The Council of Foundation in July 2006 redefined the concept of 'access' and a document appeared shortly afterwards (IBO, 2006). At the heart of both these documents is the notion that the DP needs to be expanded beyond the current universe of activity and within a more inclusive and directed access paradigm. Specifically, the 2004 Strategic Plan made reference to the widening of access through the 'use of innovative technology including e-learning', and the IB Director General stated 'we will use technology to help us leverage programmes globally' (Beard, 2006).

At the same time the IBO has now admitted, through two letters sent in July 2008 to IB World Schools (that is, schools which offer one or more of the three IB programmes), that the organization is straining under the force of continued and sustained growth. IB World Schools are doubling in number every five years, putting considerable pressure on a structure designed in the 1960s for a much smaller-sized organization. The IBO has announced plans to introduce a new organizational design with three global centres. Two of the key aims are to become more service-oriented, and to capitalize more on the network of experienced practitioners around the world. It is

within this context, of radical re-organization and re-structuring, plus a movement towards creating a more inclusive learning community, that the IBO is embarking on the pilot phase of its IBDPO project. On the one hand, this might be considered a risk in the context of radical overhaul of systems and structures, yet on the other hand it creates an opportunity for the IBO to utilize the skills of DP teachers more, and to reach out to a wider and more diverse audience. What is clear is that events are moving very quickly within the IB world, and much has occurred since the IBO first instigated the idea of online provision of the DP. The exact journey of the IBDPO project will now be examined in detail.

The IBDPO journey

The beginnings

The journey so far has been a careful one involving two small-scale projects. Bach (2001: 27), referring specifically to the IB, stated that the 'trend' of online courses was clear. In fact, this 'trend' had been a long existing one, and the IB in many ways has been very slow to get online learning off the ground. This seems symptomatic of the development of the IBO in general; Walker (2004: 3) stated the IB is 'stuck in the last century in the way that it is very institutionally bound'.

The first sign that the IBO was interested in online learning came from an interview in 1999 given by the then newly appointed Director General, George Walker (1999b), who described distance learning as one of the 'special things' that the IBO wanted to offer. At the same time, Rigney (1999) was stating that the IBO is 'now launching a new wave of development' as it strives to become a 'learning organization'. This seemed timely. Commentators were contending that distance learning is the student centred paradigm for future learning (Yellen, 1998), while about one-third of HE institutions in the US were offering online learning (Rigney, 1999).

In September 1999, the IB launched its Online Curriculum Centre (OCC) as an environment in which teachers could interact. Bach (2000: 27), in stating that 'distance learning is a reality' for the IB and a matter of 'when, rather than if', cited the example of the Seattle-based *Apex Learning* project which began in 1997 offering online versions of two of the American Advanced Placement (AP) courses, to 200 students. The year 2000 saw a five-year IB strategic plan implemented, and the IBO devoted much time to building its online presence and its website (Wallace, 2001). One Internet project that emerged was a distance learning project involving an IB school, Oulun Lyseon Lukio in Finland, acting as the provider school for a partner, Lyseonpuiston Lukio, in Rovaniemi, in Lapland Finland. This pre-IB course

began in September 2001, and was evaluated after the first IB examinations in 2004 by the IB Research Unit, and the University of Oulu. The IB devoted an entire edition of its publication *IB World* (May 2001, No. 27) to the 'e-learning phenomena' (Wallace, 2001) and specifically made reference to an online project called the *Virtual High School* (VHS). Based in Maynard, Massachusetts since 1996, the VHS project tutored 9000 students in 2007 via 370 active schools in 30 countries. This gave a clue to the likely next phase of IB online experimentation.

The pre-pilot phase

The IBO Deputy Director General stated in 2004 that the organization was open to forming partnerships with organizations that could help to further the IB Mission Statement (Hill, 2005). At the same time the pre-pilot initiative emerged, following the announcement (IB World, 2004) that the Geneva-based Rumsey Cartier Foundation had awarded a grant worth CHF 7000 for evaluating the online delivery of an IB economics course, beginning September 2004. This grant allowed Shawn Horst at Brazil's Graded School ('The American School in Sao Paulo') to develop and teach, in partnership with the VHS, a course in economics at standard level (with higher level, one of the two levels at which DP courses can be offered).

The project was evaluated by the Institute for Learning Technologies at Teachers College, Columbia University New York. Interestingly, this occurred at the same time that distance education was declared (Muirhead, 2005) to be at a crucial juncture in its historical development. Eleven students at four schools (two in the USA, one in Ecuador, and one in Brazil) were taught from the Graded School Sao Paulo, and completed their economics standard level course in May 2006 with an average score of six points (out of a maximum DP subject score of seven), compared to a world average of 5.3 for the economics standard level course that year. VHS provided the software support and trained the site coordinators at the four participating schools.

There have apparently been few research studies to determine the impact of virtual courses on student learning and/or satisfaction (Motiwalla and Tello, 2000). However, this small difference in average score of the IB economics students should be treated with caution. For instance, research into student perceptions of online learning (Howland and Moore, 2002) found that those who underwent a positive experience exhibited attributes of constructivist learners, including self-direction. What is more apparent is that the use of learner mentors, or teaching assistants, will facilitate the online learning experience (Chang, 2004). Ensuring a mentor is present at the recipient school increases the VHS course completion rate to 85 per cent,

compared to the more normal 15 per cent for online courses according to Hafar (2008).

The pilot project phase

In July 2005, the IB Director General stated in public that he was proposing the creation of an 'IB Open International College' (Walker, 2005a: 8). The IBO in April 2006 decided to go ahead with a six-year pilot project (Oliver, 2006), formally called the Diploma Programme Online. This seemed to be the 'clear initiative' that Bach (2000: 27) had stated was needed. The project would require funding of USD 2 million per year, until 2012. There would be two years of preparation followed by a four-year teaching period. In September 2008, two online DPs began in economics (standard level), and information technology in a global society (higher level), both in English (which, with French and Spanish, is one of the IB working languages), using the VHS online facility. A combined total of 75 students were to be involved, with one school providing a maximum of five students, and comparisons with the Apex Learning initiative are clear. The students will be required to take the DP examinations in May 2010.

The VHS website makes it clear how this facility works and one can see why it has been chosen by the IBO, who wish to maintain contact between students and a teacher at an authorized IB World school. The VHS classes are seemingly unlike other online courses in that all classes are teacher facilitated, with class sizes limited to 25. Classes take place entirely over the Internet and students can post their work at any time. There is an emphasis on interaction between teachers and students, and classes are offered in a scheduled asynchronous mode, meaning classes follow a normal semester schedule and lessons are due at a specified time in the week.

In early 2008 it was announced that psychology standard level, to be examined in 2009, again only in English, would be offered in partnership with another company, the Arizona-based Aventa Learning, a leading provider of online AP courses since 2002. Again, enrolment was to be limited to five students per school. The teaching of this subject in one year, rather than the more usual two, seems feasible given the finding (Bender et al., 2004) that a distance course takes less time to teach than a traditional classroom course. The potential benefits are in fact varied and will now be further examined.

The potential benefits

It has been stated (Oliver, 2006: 14) that the IBDPO could provide three main specific benefits to the IB Mission Statement. First, it would allow

schools to offer a wider range of subjects. Bach (2001) had also seen the potential for online courses giving students more choice. Second, it would allow IB schools to reach out to students who cannot afford, or are geographically unable, to attend the school. Third, it would allow current IB schools to create a more international and enriched curriculum by offering courses that they might not otherwise have been able to offer. However, this is arguably an underestimate of the true potential of online provision, and there are several further potential benefits yet to be openly discussed.

One benefit is that it will reduce the need for IB schools to find a qualified and experienced teacher in certain subjects. A shortage of teachers in international schools has been noted. The Academy of International School Heads (AISH) noted two years ago that school enrolments are rising but teacher vacancies are rising too (Broman, 2006). It was recently reported that AISH and the Association for the Advancement of International Education (AAIE) had addressed the issue of teacher shortage at a session in New York (Broman, 2008). It is not clear to what extent the IB schools are suffering from a 'recruitment crisis' (Broman, 2008: 1), but the concept of online provision of courses could help to mitigate such a problem in the future.

Another issue, rarely discussed, is the fact that the proportion of schools worldwide offering the DP in French as the working language has fallen from 1.65 per cent in 2003 to a paltry, and presumably economically unviable, 1.2 per cent in 2007. Only 19 schools worldwide were following the DP in French in 2007, compared to 166 following it in Spanish, and 1403 in English (IBO, 2007). Perhaps online distance learning provision might boost French as a working language especially if it were to be targeted at schools in French-speaking countries in West Africa. Furthermore, the financial benefits of offering online courses have seemingly not been openly discussed but this is an obvious key issue, especially if the money generated could be used to facilitate bursaries and scholarships. This would fit nicely within the greater 'access' aims of the IB Strategic Plan.

It has been shown that successful completion of a distance education course reinforces the student's self-regulation and self-discipline, and hence increases their likelihood of success in taking similar courses in the future (Bandura, 2001). Moreover, it has been shown that asynchronous online courses, where the tutor and student operate at a distance in time and place, encourage greater self-reflection (Wegerif, 1998) and self-criticism (Parker, 1999). Presumably, students feel more at ease to offer their views and thoughts. I would, therefore, contend that the provision of online learning may help to facilitate several characteristics of the 'IB Learner' as exemplified in the IB Learner Profile, a 10-point document unveiled by the

IBO in April 2006 (see Appendix 1). The precise extent of the benefits is dependent upon which scenario for online provision appears, and this is explored next.

The alternative scenarios

The IB open school

The most likely scenario, to my mind, sees authorized IB World Schools, from 2012 onwards, outsourcing courses to other authorized IB World Schools. It is stated that the 'IBO stresses that there will always be an IB World School at the centre' (Oliver, 2006). This type of school will become known as an 'IB Open School' (Beard, 2006). This will be an extension of the Sao Paulo Graded School pre-pilot, and students will be offered one or two courses online. Indeed, the President of the IBO Council of Foundation (now 'IBO Board') has stated that in the long run it may become compulsory for students to undertake a minimum of one course online as 'preparation for learning about the virtual world in which young people will be operating' (Seefried, 2008).

This arguably makes much sense. Any curriculum that wishes to be taken seriously as a pre-HE vehicle needs to expose its students to online distance learning, which is likely to be encountered later in life. This is specially so in the USA, where 35 per cent of DP schools are located (figure correct in November 2008). The 2006 Sloane Consortium Report, Making the Grade: Online Education in the United States, showed that nearly 3.2 million students were taking at least one online course. A total of 96 per cent of the 2200 colleges and universities surveyed by this Report offered distance learning provision. Even commentators sceptical about the ability of computers to change education accept the premise that schools need to prepare young people for life in a 'high tech' society (Monke, 2006).

Many international schools have a rich experience of offering the DP over four decades, and have developed courses that might be useful for online provision. One example is Peace and Conflict Studies, a DP standard level course developed in 1977 by Atlantic College in south Wales, but which has never caught the popular imagination. Although other schools have taken up the course, only 35 students worldwide out of a total of 28,000 DP students sat the May 2005 examination in this subject (van Oord, 2006). The subject seems ripe for an online distance learning option, facilitated by teachers at Atlantic College. The literature shows that reaching a wider audience is a key motivator for e-tutoring, and the teachers of DP Peace and Conflict Studies are, one would imagine, likely to be keen to 'widen their net' (Brown, 1999).

A further example involves DP History, which at higher level requires schools to select one of a number of regional options for study. In the May 2005 examination, 98 per cent of students sat either the History of Americas (62 per cent) or the History of Europe (36 per cent) paper. Only 1.5 per cent took the History of Asia paper, and only 0.7 per cent the History of Africa. Of course, such figures reflect the global spread of IB schools, yet it has led to the conclusion by one IB World School Director that 'the curricula that we adopt are largely centred upon the perpetuation of an Anglo-American perspective' (Lewis, 2006: 53). If the History of Africa could be offered online as a distance learning option, it might prove attractive to more students around the world, in areas where it is at present not financially viable.

Some international schools have a very rich 'mother tongue' programme, catering for a diversity of language speakers. The International School of London, for instance, offers 17 languages within the mainstream curriculum (Whelan, 2005). Given that the DP covers the learning of both English and mother tongue languages, this could be a valuable source of language provision for many schools worldwide who cannot offer such a range of courses. There are specific benefits to being an IB Open School. These schools would have an immediate marketing niche within the local IB market: important given the findings by McGhee (2003) that schools in England, for instance, have adopted the DP partly to carve out a distinctive identity for themselves. Also, the public relations benefits of offering courses to students outside the school community ought not to be overlooked, given that international schools have long been criticized for often being insular and isolated from the local community.

The IB partner school

A second and perhaps less likely scenario sees schools that cannot afford to offer the DP in its entirety buying into one or two courses offered by authorized IB Open Schools. It has been said that this type of partnership school could be known as an 'IB Partner School' (Walker, 2002a), and might even have its own logo and visual identity. Moreover, IB Partner Schools would have the advantage of not paying the IB's annual base fee (which is the same amount for every school).

The strategic planning process has shown that the IBO is concerned about the apparent exclusivity of its three programmes and would wish to make these programmes less exclusive than they currently seem to be. The IBO (2006) access document stated that the IBDP should reach out to students who cannot physically attend an IB World School. There is a huge disparity, however, between the extent of IBDP activity worldwide.

The IBDP may have moved beyond its initial European nexus, but it has made limited inroads into most other countries. The IBO was concerned in 2006 that 58 per cent of IB world schools were located in the 'big four' countries (the USA, Canada, the UK and Australia; in rank order). However, this figure had risen to 60 per cent by November 2008. A total of 57 per cent of students who sat the May 2007 DP examination were located in the USA alone. It was also stated in 2006 that 80 per cent of schools were located in 20 countries, but this figure had grown to 81.4 per cent by mid-2008. In 2005, 73 per cent of IB schools were in 'high income countries' (IBO, 2006) and the majority of countries have a core of fewer than five IB schools. The lack of depth is exemplified by the fact that 38 countries entered fewer than 50 students for the May 2007 IBDP examinations, and 68 entered fewer than 100. On the other hand, eight countries each entered more than 1000 students. The IB Partner School concept might help to mitigate these discrepancies.

The blended learning package

A third scenario, perhaps more idealistic than realistic, sees globally mobile communities buying into courses offered by IB Open Schools, alongside a face-to-face learning activity. Beard (2006) gave an example of how the IBDPO might be offered, for instance, to a sports federation of athletes who must train and perform around the world. In a sense, this reflects a return to the pragmatic purpose of the DP as satisfying a need of the mobile international community. Such a scenario carries with it, however, another dilemma for the IBO in delivering the whole DP online, since students must undertake at least 150 hours of 'creativity, action and service' (CAS) activities plus a further course in philosophical analysis called 'Theory of Knowledge' (ToK). The latter two courses are essential for the Diploma to be awarded.

Walker (2005a: 9) fleshed out this scenario at a conference in Quebec, giving a fictitious example of a Slovakian skier who trains and competes for five months of the year. She could take six IB courses via one or more IB Open School(s) while training and competing, and undertake the ToK and CAS elements at a local IB school in Bratislava, her home city. This form of 'blended learning' experience only works, of course, if the student has access to a 'real' IB World School. Such access could be difficult in the 38 countries where there exists a single IB World School and in the 45 countries where there are fewer than five (figures correct August 2008). This raises the issue of the key challenges facing the IBDPO project, to be discussed next.

The key challenges

One key challenge involves creating a sense of community via online distance learning. The IBO launched in April 2006 a new Community theme entitled Our Shared Humanity. Moreover, Walker (2006: 11) talked of the desire to develop through online learning 'a sense of community which students can feel part of without being present'. However, online learning situations are their own type of social aggregation (Jonassen, 2000). Attempts to create a sense of community among online learners is difficult and often artificial (Stacey, 1999). It is argued (Conrad, 2002a) that learners are pushed, not pulled, into a community framework; a sort of 'arranged marriage'.

A second challenge is securing the commitment of a core of 'IB Open Schools'. Marrs (1995: 21) noted how distance education runs the risk of becoming a peripheral activity, without commitment from or significance to the institution. An online questionnaire in September 2006 among over 1000 IB schools showed a positive attitude towards distance learning; 53 per cent claimed their students would be interested in undertaking an online course, and the IBO estimated that the potential demand could be in excess of 5700 students. Although little reference has been made in literature to the 'perfect' class size, Arbaugh (2000) argues that this is an important factor in the success of online learning since smaller class sizes facilitate greater integration and sense of community. Research from online conferencing has shown (Harasim et al., 1995) that 15–25 students is a good class size, while the University of Phoenix, which has almost 50,000 online students, has a typical class size of 11 (Olsen, 2002). Given the IB aim to foster a sense of 'community', a class size of about a dozen students per tutor, as practiced in the pre-pilot phase, is arguably a good fit. Assuming such a class size, the IBDPO project will require about 500 trained tutors. This may not sound a lot, but it will require a large commitment from the present bloc of 1793 DP schools that existed in November 2008.

A significant factor affecting successful online learning is the 'perception of presence' that students hold of their teacher, and the institution they are interacting with. The 'perception of presence' is defined by Shin (2003) as the degree to which the student senses the availability of, and connectedness with, their tutor, and has been referred to as 'Transactional Presence' (TP). What is not clear is the extent to which TP is affected by large geographical distance, as in the likely scenario of an IB programme being delivered from another continent, or being delivered by a tutor of a different nationality and culture to the learner. What is reasonably clear is

that the use of supplementary technologies can help to facilitate the impact of online learning. It has been stated (Dickey, 2004) that in the rush to promote the use of online distance learning, relatively little research has been conducted about learner feelings of isolation, alienation and frustration, although technologies such as web-logs (blogs) may act as a preventative measure.

Pyvis and Chapman (2005) suggest that students studying in their home country but with an overseas institution may experience 'culture shock', and this issue certainly requires further research as it is very pertinent to the IB. Martin (2005) states that videoconferencing has much potential to enrich distance learning and needs to be more widely used in online curriculum delivery. However, this specialized use of technology may reduce access in poorer schools, and thus conflicts with one of the main aims of the IBDPO. It could thus provide support for the claim by Sen (2001: 12) that the IB is a 'socially elitist educational programme' that 'absorbs enormous resources' and is thus not appropriate for many less developed countries. Here lies another dilemma for the IBO.

There is a further considerable challenge; ensuring the IBDPO meets the criteria for an 'IB Learner' experience. As critically implied by Saba (2005), distance education is grounded in technology, and its usage requires much investigation, yet the social science base of the field should not be ignored. In spite of reservations by Laud and Mathew (2007) about the extent to which technology can support international school missions, the IBO seems confident following the pre-pilot phases, that online provision can generate the 'debate that is so vital for the critical thinking element of IB teaching' (Oliver, 2006: 14). Wallace (2000) was certainly confident that technology in general, and the Internet in particular, would herald the emergence of a new IBDP student, and a study (Ali, 2004) of using the internet to deliver nursing courses via distance education showed that students learnt through reflection, exploration, and use of critical thinking.

Garrison et al. (2003) stated that online learning had the advantage over traditional forms of distance learning in facilitating critical communities of learning, while the study by Bullen (1998), at university level, concluded that computer conferencing should be considered by distance educators as a way of facilitating interaction and critical thinking and overcoming some of the limitations of correspondence-style learning. It has also been found (Conrad, 2002b) that online learners value and construct ways of 'being nice' to their fellow learners, creating tolerable levels of harmony and community. This seems fully compatible with the IBO Mission Statement. At the same time, few studies

have explored the situations under which students engage productively in cross-national distance learning and it has been found (Volet and Wosnitza, 2004) that such activity produces little evidence of social negotiation of meaning.

Any paper that discusses the issue of maintaining quality provision has to discuss cheating, including plagiarism. Worryingly, it has been observed (Burgoon et al., 2003) that people who feel more 'distant' from their teachers tend to cheat more. However, there is evidence (Kaczmarczyk, 2001) to suggest that students cheat less in distance learning than with traditional instruction, and Kaczmarczyk (2001) also reported that professors involved in distance learning do not see cheating as a major issue concerning their students. Heberling (2002) states the ironic point that it may actually be harder to cheat online, and it is also easier to detect. It should be pointed out, though, that researchers such as Bull (1999) believe that many studies of distance-learning assessment have generally ignored the problem of cheating. This controversial issue will need monitoring and exploring by the IBO during the pilot-phase.

Lastly, a major challenge faces the IBO in keeping abreast of distance learning development. There is evidence that the situation may be very different by 2012, the point by which the IBDPO will have completed its trial stages. There is already talk (Librero et al., 2007) of the cell phone becoming a major distance learning tool, especially in Asia, and there is discussion of the use of 'adventure learning' as a means of exploring real-world issues through collaborative and authentic learning environments (Doering, 2006). The future advent of mobile learning (m-learning) is seen optimistically (Brown, 2005) as a potential tool for distance learning in Africa, an area of the world that has so far proved elusive for the IBO.

It has also been stated (Rasmussen et al., 2006) that multicultural education in the future will need to involve differing models of innovative and engaging online learning, where tutors use multiple strategies to build virtual environments. The point being raised here is that the DP journey towards online distance learning has been deliberately slow, and the IBDPO is still in the early stages of evaluation in terms of meeting the mission statement of the IBO and its schools, and the profile of the 'IB Learner'. However, at the same time, distance-learning developments more generally continue to move ahead at a rapid pace. Herein lies another major dilemma for the IBO, and one that appears difficult to resolve since speeding up the process could compromise quality.

Conclusion

The IBO is keen to move the DP beyond its current geographical and socio-economic areas of activity, following four decades of rapid growth. A new era of planned activity since 2004 has offered the opportunity for innovative strategies to widen access. The IBO has been put under pressure, for example by Sutcliffe (2001), to open up the DP beyond its core base of fee-paying international schools and elite national schools, which can afford its current fee structure. Walker (2005a: 9) sees the possibility for the IBDPO to 'create a virtual college that has a global outreach and a multicultural human face'. However, the IBO is worried that while 'new models' of activity may improve accessibility they may at the same time compromise quality provision (Walker, 2005b). Such an issue is of particular concern given the fact that the IBO now promotes an ambitious 'Service Statement': 'Our goal is to provide each member of the IB community with a high quality service, characterized by a timely response, accuracy, integrity and professionalism' (IBO, 2008).

In theory, online distance learning seems compatible with both the IBO mission statement and the IB 'Learner Profile', although much more evaluation of this claim is required. However, the important task of ensuring quality provision is limiting the pace of online provision development, and will probably limit the ultimate provision of the IBDPO within the confines of the authorized IB World schools. As stated by Walker (2002b: 29), it is 'not possible to simply buy the IB programs off the shelf', and this limits the potential impact of 'Scenario 2' described above. It is difficult to envisage schools in sub-Saharan Africa, for example, buying into the IBDPO without proper authorized IB World School status, assuming they even have the technological capability to do so. The IBDPO might generate greater internal access to courses, especially relatively marginalized ones such as Peace and Conflict Studies, and The History of Africa option, but will perhaps not achieve the lofty aim of generating greater external access. In fact, online provision of the IBDP could in the long run facilitate a stronger view that it is an exclusive curriculum, offered by a largely hidden elite body of schools for the benefit of other elite schools with access to, for example, sophisticated technology. The notion of a worldwide technologically linked 'exclusive learning community' seems completely contrary to the aims of the IBO 2004 strategic plan.

The IBO is entering an interesting and potentially exciting phase of activity. The introduction of the IBDPO in theory could herald a new direction for the IBO both in serving a wider and more diverse community, and serving its present community through a broader lens of curriculum offerings.

However, the IBO needs to tread carefully as the issue involves a number of complex issues. The dilemma of widening access without compromising quality is a thorny one. No doubt the issue will be addressed again, with more details forthcoming, when the pilot phase ends in 2012.

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Biographical note

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Appendix 1

The IB learner profile

'The IB Learner profile is the IB mission statement translated into a set of learning outcomes for the twenty first century. The learner profile provides a long-term vision of education. It is a set of ideals that can inspire, motivate and focus the work of schools and teachers, uniting them in a common purpose' (from http://www.ibo.org/programmes/profile/).

IB learners strive to be:

- Inquirers
- Knowledgeable
- Thinkers
- Communicators
- Principled
- Open-minded
- Caring
- Risk-takers
- Balanced
- Reflective