

Pathways to Continued and University Education Award 2021

Winning Initiative

The British International School Abu Dhabi

Overview of the school:

The British International School Abu Dhabi is a part of Nord Anglia Education currently operating 66 schools across the World. Our school opened in 2009 and has grown year on year, building on its strong community and academic reputation. Our students follow a British Curriculum from 3-16 and from 16-18 follow the International Baccalaureate Diploma program. We are non-selective and have approximately 1800 students on roll representing 92 nationalities making us a truly international school of which we are very proud.

Summary of initiative:

Following the abrupt end to our Year 13 International Baccalaureate course in March 2020, our teachers felt that students had been robbed of their final opportunities to revisit key issues in their learning and that the gap between the end of the course and the beginning of university courses was too long. We felt a strong moral obligation to continue the education of this cohort even though their 'formal' learning had ended. As a result, our teachers created a series of 'Pre-University Learning Courses' to allow students to continue their preparations for undergraduate study. Following a survey of the university courses which our students would be following in the Autumn, we created six 'channels' which students opted into depending upon their choices. Teachers then prepared lessons, reading materials and held seminar style discussions designed to bridge the gap between the IB and university study and help prepare our students for their first weeks at university. We also provided counselling and guidance for students on personal issues related to leaving home and moving to a new city or country which even included cooking lessons! Since the course was on-line, we were able to make the course available to students from our sister-school in Dubai and teachers from Dubai also took part in preparing short courses to inspire and interest the students.

How the initiative has demonstrated a positive impact on student aspirations and choices:

Our decision to create these courses was a strong and positive message to our students that learning could continue even if a 'formal curriculum' had ended. There were to be no assessments or exams within our courses, the teachers led these courses simply for the love and joy of learning. This in itself was a positive message to the students for whom the alternative was potentially several months of academic inactivity.

Teachers were given free reign to create their own courses and encouraged to draw upon their own undergraduate experiences so that their own interests and passions could be drawn out and passed onto the students. Courses on Spanish history, criminology, linguistics and pathology were just some of the courses that teachers used their own resources and knowledge to show students new and more complex ways of thinking about aspects of the subjects that they had chosen to study at university.

Students were also free to attend as many of the courses as they wished which allowed students of languages for instance, to join discussions on history and culture which were relevant to their first choice. Maths students frequently joined the science courses just to 'listen in' and this freedom to

'dip in' to the courses gave students an insight into subject areas and discussions which improved their general knowledge and encouraged them to think in different ways.

How the initiative involved a range of colleges and universities, subject courses and destinations appropriate to the size and nature of our school:

The initiative began by using the university subject choices that students had made to create six courses. Students would opt into the course most appropriate to their future university study choices and there was enough flexibility in the timetable to allow students to attend 'lessons' in more than one course, which many did. The six courses were:

- International Politics, Business and Economics
- Medicine, Biochemistry and the Sciences
- Psychology and Neuroscience
- Graphic Design, Photography, Fine Arts
- Maths, Engineering and Computer Science
- European Literature and Culture Studies

In each case, teachers were encouraged to draw upon their own subject knowledge and their own university experiences to develop lessons that would stimulate students to make higher level connections between subject areas and which would take them beyond the work that they had been doing for the IB. An example of this was a course in the European Literature and Culture course which focused on the development of political ideology and thought after the French Revolution. This was then linked to arts and literature in the 19th century in order to develop contextual thinking. The Psychology and Neuroscience course contained a unit of work on criminology which two of our students were intending to study at university but which they had not covered as part of their IB course.

How the initiative included the student voice and/or student action:

The onset of the lockdown in March and the cancellation of IB exams left students facing several months without any academic rigour or stimulation before travelling to their chosen university. Some were proactive and joined online courses which we encouraged and, in some cases, used in our own 'Pre-University' initiative. Whilst some schools chose to simply close their year 13 and bid their students farewell, we felt strongly that we should continue with some form of teaching and learning, at least until June when a 'normal' school year would usually end.

Whilst maintaining high academic standards was at the forefront of this initiative, we were also concerned to meet the personal needs of our students and to help maintain their routines and wellbeing during the uncertain lockdown period. Pastoral care continued to be provided by the Year Group team, students were invited to online sessions with the student counselling team who facilitated discussion groups allowing students to air their worries about leaving home and students were also encouraged to act as mentors to younger students in year 10 and 12 who were undertaking the IGCSE and IB courses that they themselves had recently completed.

The six courses were created by teachers specifically to relate to the university choices that students had made and students were given the final choice of which course they would predominantly take part in. Parents were also kept fully informed of the initiative and encouraged to support the students at home.

How the initiative addressed a challenge and demonstrates the potential for longer-term development as a sustainable initiative for the school:

The main challenge that this initiative addressed was the prospect of year 13 students receiving no contact with teachers, no formal education and no support from teachers or counsellors (or each other) as they prepared for university from March 2020. In 'usual times' such support would be maintained at least until the end of June as students prepared for and undertook their IB exams. The COVID-19 crisis meant that students faced a prolonged period of isolation and the cancellation of the exams meant that the school was under no 'academic' obligation to continue to work with year 13 students. As mentioned earlier, we did however feel a strong 'moral' obligation to maintain our support for this cohort especially since they faced all the emotional upheaval of leaving home to attend university in addition to the uncertainties caused by COVID-19.

It was clear to us throughout the project that the style of learning, with reading material and seminar style discussion and debate, was a very good pre-cursor to what students would be facing in the autumn at their university and discussion turned to how we might use something very similar to this project in the future. Notably, once year 13 students have completed their exams (usually by the end of May), a project like this could exist each year and we could expand the group of schools involved allowing for a greater range of 'teacher passions' to be taught.

Sharing beyond the school community:

The initiative has already been shared beyond our own community into the Nord Anglia School of Dubai. Talks between senior leaders on how the project would develop led to further discussions about future projects, especially relating to the Core elements of the IB. Teachers in Sports Exercise and Health Science forged links which led to competitive 'online sporting competitions' lower down the school and there was considerable cooperation between the counselling teams in the two schools as they sought to give year 13 students a forum for discussion of their main worries and concerns about going to university.

As a community of 66 schools throughout the Nord Anglia Group, there is considerable scope for a project of this type to be extended into every corner of the world and for teachers with a huge range of expertise to become involved. Our increasing expertise of online learning will mean that this initiative can proceed on a multi-national basis, even in the 'post-Covid' educational landscape.

Details of the project were shared with Edarabia, a well-known organisation in the Gulf region which promotes education and provides information to families about schools. Following publication of the article by Edarabia, a school in Qatar contacted our school for further details of the project.

See <https://www.edarabia.com/uae-schools-ensure-year-13-students-not-left-behind/>