

RESEARCH

Chandaria Research Centre

The Road After: A Longitudinal Study of the Lives and Early Careers of Alums

Research Snapshot #1

THE FIRST YEAR STORY:

ACADEMIC PREPAREDNESS AND THE TRANSITION TO UNIVERSITY



CHANDARIA
RESEARCH CENTRE
BRANKSOME HALL

The Road After:

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THE FIRST YEAR STORY: ACADEMIC PREPAREDNESS AND THE TRANSITION TO UNIVERSITY

Graduation from high school and the transition to post-secondary education is an important developmental milestone for young adults. While this life event creates valuable opportunities for personal growth and change, it can often bring with it increased challenges, stress and anxiety. The first year of university is the most difficult period of adjustment for students (Giddan, 1988) since, in addition to emotional and relational challenges, they also face new and increased academic pressures (Hicks & Heastie, 2008).



















































Many of them will also be living away from home for the first time, and will have to navigate these pressures even as they continue to individuate and adjust to their new lives. How well students are able to meet these new academic challenges depends, in part, on the academic self-efficacy beliefs they hold—how prepared they feel and how confident they are in their abilities (Elliott, 2016). This snapshot is part of a three-part series that reports on key findings from the Road After study about graduates' experiences in their first year of university. It focuses on the students' perceptions of their academic preparedness as they transition to post-secondary education after completing their IB programme at Branksome Hall, an all-girls' school* in Toronto, Canada.

The International Baccalaureate (IB) is a liberal arts—focused educational programme that encourages its students to become active learners, critical thinkers, well-rounded individuals and engaged global citizens. Students are encouraged to become inquirers, thinkers, communicators and risk-takers; to be knowledgeable, principled, open-minded, caring, balanced and reflective, traits which cumulatively define the [IB Learner Profile](#).

The First Year Story

The First Year Story captures and compares alums' experiences during their first year post graduation. This story is based on Exit and Year 1 surveys completed by the 2017 and 2018 graduating cohorts, and interviews from a smaller number of alums from these cohorts. The Exit survey was completed by 93 alums from the 2017, 2018 and 2019 cohorts. The Year 1 survey was completed by 64 alums from the 2017 and 2018 cohorts (See Figure 2). In the surveys, respondents were asked whether they felt that their IB schooling had prepared them for their future academic studies, and how much they valued the IB programme at Branksome Hall. Graduates were also asked whether the inquiry projects they completed as part of their IB programme (e.g., the Extended Essay) allowed them to develop the research and critical thinking skills needed for future academic studies. Similarly, the interview participants were asked how academically prepared they felt upon entering university, especially relative to their peers. To protect participants' identities, this report uses participants' chosen pseudonyms.

THE ROAD AFTER - STUDY OVERVIEW

| | DATA COLLECTION YEAR | | | | | | | | | | |
|--------------|---|---|---|------|---|---|--|---|---|---|---|
| | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 | 2025 | 2026 | 2027 |
| CLASS OF '17 | E  | 1   |  | | 4   | 5   | | | | | |
| CLASS OF '18 | | E  | 1   | | 3   |  | 5   | | | | |
| CLASS OF '19 | | | E  | | 2   | 3   |  | 5   | | | |
| CLASS OF '20 | | | | | E/1   |  | 3   |  | 5   | | |
| CLASS OF '21 | | | | | E  | 1   |  | 3   |  | 5   | |
| CLASS OF '22 | | | | | | E  | 1   |  | 3   |  | 5   |

LEGEND:  SURVEYS (E - EXIT; 1 - YEAR 1 FOLLOW UP; 2 - YEAR 2 FOLLOW UP; 3 - YEAR 3 FOLLOW UP; 4 - YEAR 4 FOLLOW UP; 5 - YEAR 5 FOLLOW UP)  INTERVIEWS

Figure 1: Research methods and study timeline

Note: This research snapshot focuses on the First Year Story, which includes Exit and Year 1 data from the 2017–2019 Classes, indicated in colour. No data was collected in 2020 due to COVID-19.

The Road After study documents Branksome Hall graduates' perceptions of their lives over a five-year period after high school. It explores the extent to which graduates' schooling experiences at Branksome have an impact on their post-secondary education, interests and their development as young adults. The study is guided by the following research questions:

What are graduates' perceptions of the impact of an International Baccalaureate education on their lived and academic experiences?

What are graduates' experiences as they transition into post-secondary education and/or adulthood?

To answer these questions, we involve multiple cohorts of graduates (starting with the Class of 2017 and ending with the Class of 2022) in this ongoing longitudinal study. The study uses a combination of surveys and individual interviews to generate case studies of the Branksome Hall graduate experience, as illustrated in Figure 1. Graduating Branksome Hall students are asked about their perceptions of the impact of their academic program. The same cohort is surveyed again at the end of their first year of post-secondary education and/or following a gap or sabbatical year taken for travel or work (Year 1), midway through their programs (Year 3) and then upon graduation (Year 4 or 5). A select number of students (5–10) within each cohort is asked to participate in a series of interviews that probe more deeply into their experiences to gain additional insights. The participants are asked about their academic experiences as part of the International Baccalaureate program, their global engagement, their approaches to well-being and their perceptions of their leadership skills.

| WHO ARE THE RESPONDENTS? | | | | | | |
|--|--|---|--|---|--|--|
| 93 participants from the 2017, 2018 and 2019 cohorts completed the Exit Survey | 64 participants from the 2017 and 2018 cohorts completed the Year 1 Survey | 10 participants from the 2017 and 2018 cohorts participated in the interviews | 60% of survey respondents entered Branksome Hall between grades 7–12 | 90% of survey respondents attended Branksome Hall as day participants | More than 91% of all respondents attended a post-secondary institution | The largest fields of study were Liberal Arts / Humanities followed by Health / Medical Sciences |

Figure 2: The First Year Story: Exit and Year 1 study participants

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

The First Year Story suggests that, overall, Branksome Hall graduates feel academically well-prepared. Both cohorts of survey respondents strongly believe that their IB education prepared them academically for university—with 90 percent either agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement—and value the IB program at the school. Our findings echo existing research demonstrating that students enrolled in IB programs report feeling well-prepared for university-level work. These studies also suggest that students tend to feel more prepared than their non-IB peers (Kolb, 1996; Saavedra et al., 2016; Wright & Lee, 2014). As with Branksome graduates, students perceive their IB diplomas (Thelin, et al., 2002; Saavedra et al., 2016) and the IB curriculum to be useful preparation for university (Taylor & Porath, 2006). Jill, one of the study participants, summed up this perception of the IB programme in her reflection:

“I think the IB in general is such a great foundation for every aspect of being a student in academia because of how multi-faceted it is, because we learn about how to be a good student in every which way” (Jill, 2017).

Adrienne felt that the IB programme had prepared her to manage heavy workloads:

“Overall the [university] course load isn’t super heavy, in my opinion. Especially coming out of IB I felt like I wasn’t freaked out by having exams that were worth 75% of my mark in the course because I was used to that already” (Adrienne, 2018).

Writing, Research and Critical Thinking Skills

Branksome Hall graduates value the writing, research and analytical skills they acquired through their IB education. Approximately 80 percent of the Year 1 survey respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that their Branksome Hall education prepared them academically for university by teaching them research, critical thinking and communication skills. As one student participant put it:

“I think one thing that I’ve been considering recently is sort of what skills, like academic skills, I’ve taken away from Branksome that I’ve found I’ve applied to my university experience. I think that IB is very unique in that it helps you develop a writing style, and that you get a lot of feedback on that, and that for me ... I’m most confident in my writing style” (Trianna, 2017).

In particular, participants mentioned the Extended Essay as having helped them build both research and critical thinking skills. Echoing the survey responses, interview participants reflected on the ways their Extended Essay work prepared them for lengthy writing assignments for their university courses:

“I felt really prepared when we had papers due and written assignments, especially, I guess, longer papers, because the first year, the longest papers are usually 2000 words, and I was like, Okay guys, we’ve written 4000-word essays, you’re good at that, and yeah, it felt really good because I knew I know how to structure it, I knew how to—well at least, I mean a little better than my peers—I knew how to cite, how to reference” (Spina, 2018).

This experience directly supports the research finding that the IB Extended Essay “allows students to investigate a topic of special interest and acquaints them with the independent research and writing skills expected at university” (Hill & Saxton, 2014, p. 46).

However, some graduates also reported that the skills and training they acquired at Branksome, as in essay writing, for example, were largely restricted to those formats supported by the IB programme. Trianna (2017), for instance, recounted her realization that,

“This [organizing an essay] isn’t the set way to do it. There are so many ways people can do it. There are essays based on a chronology, or writing an essay based on a case study, or intellectual framework, it’s not just the set outline which we learned from IB.”

Gaining an awareness of different learning techniques and academic approaches in university, especially those they may not have encountered as part of their IB curriculum, was thus another significant aspect of the students’ academic transitions.

Subject Preparedness

Graduates reported feeling most prepared for two subjects: English and History. One reason cited for this was the development of writing skills, as discussed above. As one participant described,

“I think for the subjects and area that I was most prepared for was definitely History, because that’s what we had to write a lot of essays for and I think Branksome teaches that really, really well. Especially with the Extended Essay I was able to kind of take all that I learned from that experience and apply it to history class and it ended up being my best subject. So, thank you, Branksome” (Amelie, 2017).

However, graduates also reported being well prepared for other subjects, such as mathematics and the sciences, with some describing first-year university courses in these subjects as being “review” (Esmerelda, 2017).

It should be noted that research suggests that “fast-tracking”—skipping first-year introductory courses in university, which graduates from advanced programs such as the IB may be inclined to do—may not be advisable from a developmental perspective. Presenting his research to Branksome Hall in 2019, Dr. Andrew Arida reminded students, for example, that although they may feel prepared academically, there is also a socialization component of post-secondary learning that many first-year courses provide. Students who do not take those courses may miss out on this process.

In our study, some participants also reported feeling that they were not as well prepared in subjects that required practice-based training and the development of technical skills. One student felt, for example, that more time could have been allocated for acquiring hands-on experience and training in music, such as through practical projects.

Study Skills and Habits

What the study participants valued most, perhaps, were the study skills and effective work habits they acquired during their time in high school. As one participant described it, she “learned how to learn things, and that’s a skill that I definitely think has helped me” (Adrienne, 2018). Moreover, graduates reported having learned the value of “taking a genuine interest in what you’re learning” (Jill, 2017).

In terms of specific skills, participants cited time management as having helped them during their first year, a skill they learned at Branksome Hall and which they felt distinguished them from their peers at university. Approximately 60 percent of the survey respondents felt that their time at Branksome Hall enabled them to acquire time management skills to some degree. Interview participants described their strong work ethic and how they had learnt to multi-task and to “figur[e] out how to organize and schedule my work, rather than procrastinate” (Trianna, 2017). These findings support the conclusion drawn by Larson and Kurtyka (2017) that the “IB does more than just get students into college; it strengthens the habits of mind they need to be successful there,” including flexibility and the ability to manage one’s time and prioritize responsibilities (p. 87).

CONSIDERATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PROGRAMMING

The story of Branksome Hall graduates’ transitions from high school to post-secondary education makes an important contribution to research. It fills a gap in existing research by focusing on students’ experiences of moving from high school to university. There is extraordinarily little extant research that exclusively documents the experience of graduates of all-girls’ schools. Previous research that has

focused on IB students’ university experiences has tended to be affiliated with the International Baccalaureate organization, either by virtue of funding by the IB organization or through researchers’ own organizational affiliations. The Road After study, on the other hand, examines the post-secondary experiences of IB graduates but has been designed and conducted by an independent organization.

The study also yields important insights for ongoing and future programming at Branksome Hall. In particular, graduates’ perceptions of the areas in which they felt academically prepared, as well as those in which they did not, may help to guide future programming. For instance, this First Year Story suggests there is an opportunity to augment practice-based training for subjects such as music, and to introduce students to non-IB supported writing approaches and other frameworks they may encounter in university.

The First Year Story also surfaced the idea that students’ social-emotional well-being at university entrance may be linked to perceptions of academic preparedness and academic performance. This will be the subject of the next brief in this three-part snapshot series. As work continues on this Chandaria Research Centre study, our areas for further exploration include the development of leadership skills during the transition from high school to university, and navigating this transition during a global pandemic.

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PARTNERS IN THIS PROJECT

This project and series of publications is the product of years of collaboration between researchers and school partners. We wish to acknowledge those involved in this work.

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