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HOW TO GET INTO YOUR DREAM UNIVERSITY

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Congratulations on obtaining the **only** university guidebook aimed specifically at helping students enrolled in the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program get into the university of their dreams. By picking up and reading this book you are already well on your way to making sure your journey to higher education is a smooth and successful process.

I still vividly remember filling out my own applications for UK universities way back in 2007. I was lucky enough to have the guidance of my older brother (and co-author), but also two well-experienced university coordinators (one specializing in UK university applications, the other in US colleges) and a handful of super supportive teachers who themselves studied at top-tier universities around the world.

A lot has changed in the last fifteen years. As an EU student, I remember that my university fees were around £2,000 per year (it

is now around £9,000¹ – thank you Brexit!) and we had a choice of six universities (it is now down to five). The UCAS online system was still in its infancy, and my application to Oxford was done by hand (which was super stressful for me as I was worried that they would judge my awful handwriting!) Acceptance and rejection letters arrived not by email, but by post into your mailbox.

Even though much has changed, the rules and strategies of applying to top universities are largely the same. One thing that certainly has not changed is just how important it is to get your application right. You are submitting something that will decide the next 3-4 years of your life.

Thinking about university is also something that you cannot postpone too far into your IB journey. In fact, even whilst choosing your IB subjects in pre-IB, you should already be thinking about how this will impact or limit your choices (more on this later).

Before we get into the specifics however, I would like to outline my motivation for putting this book together and why it is important for you to read it. First and foremost, it is no secret that the International Baccalaureate program is still not where it should be in terms of worldwide recognition and university acceptance. While the program has made leaps and bounds over the last few decades, there is still a long way to go before it can overtake the A-Levels or AP in terms of popularity and acknowledgment. The implications of this for current students are immense. Almost all the information and help (both free and paid) is not really written with the IB student in mind. This book hopes to change that.

At the outset, the IB program's relative obscurity may not seem like much of a worry. After all, most of the information on university websites is helpful regardless of where you studied or which high school program you are taking. However, when you start to

¹ In fairness, UK home students also pay much higher fees these days – but at least they can get interest-free loans

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consider the fact that **IB** students tend to come from foreign places, unfamiliar with local education system and requirements, you start to feel that there is a gap in information and extra help is needed.

I am also often approached by students who say that, even though, they had predictions of 42 and 7, 6, 6 in **HL**, they failed to get an offer from **LSE/Oxbridge/Harvard/Yale/etc.** I tell them that I have known more than a handful of students with grade 45 predictions (and final result!) who also did not get those offers. It happens. But the inevitable follow-up question is: ‘Why? What do I need to do to get an offer?’

This book aims to shed some light on that question and many others. We have split this guide into some introductory chapters and then some regional chapters (the **UK**, the **USA**, the **Netherlands**, **Canada**, **Australia**, **Germany**, and **Hong Kong**) and each chapter will guide you through the application process and what you can do as an **IB** student to maximize your chances of getting into the best universities.

Choosing which university to attend, or whether to go to university at all after two intense years of the International Baccalaureate program is no easy decision. This guidebook aims to help those students who have their hearts set on higher education at the university of their dreams. But first, let’s answer some basic questions...

How to use this book?

Writing a university guide for **IB** students proved to be a more monumental task than we expected. The main difficulty lay in the fact that application processes vary considerably across countries and continents, so we did not want **UK** applicants to waste their time reading about **SAT** exams, and likewise we don’t want to confuse those applying to **US** colleges with all this talk about **UCAS**.

Here is how we suggest you read this book:

1. Read the first five chapters which deal with general advice and contain information that *every IB* student should know.
2. We then suggest you also read our UK chapter as it will cover the references and also offer some tips of how to choose a course.
3. Thereafter, flip to the relevant chapter that concerns your potential country destination.

What countries recognize the IB?

IB Diploma students apply to institutions in more than 100 countries each year. Many universities are now aware of the IB Diploma and its benefits, thanks to the IBO's continued efforts to assure its global acceptance. The Diploma, however, is still interpreted differently in different countries. As IB students apply to universities in particular regions more frequently than in others, overall awareness is not necessarily uniform. In IB-specific admissions policies, several universities explicitly specify what they anticipate of IB applicants. Some of them will be discussed in more detail in later chapters.

Do universities like the IB?

They certainly do! Most colleges do not express an official preference for one qualification over another, and each application is judged on its own merits. However, studies of IBDP students in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Mexico, and China reveal that IBDP students are more likely to continue undergraduate studies. They are also more likely to gain admission to prestigious and competitive universities than their non-IB peers. The esteemed 'Ivy League' colleges in the US, for instance, are

favorite topic was about externalities and market failure, and I am greatly looking forward to learning about monetary and fiscal policies. Having talked to graduates with Economics degrees, I understand that the depth at which these and other topics are studied at university level is much greater, which is why I want to pursue an Economics degree at university level.

I also really enjoy Higher Level Mathematics. Within the course, statistics is what appeals most to me. I believe that a good knowledge of statistics will help me in analyzing data when reading academic papers. Currently I am finishing an Extended Essay in Mathematics in which I analyze a 2000-year-old geometric question known as “Alhazen’s Problem”. I genuinely took great pleasure in going through the whole process of writing an essay – doing the research, organizing it, and editing my work.

I have a strong passion for football and having played as central defender at Varsity level for the past three years, I am hoping to continue this sport at university. Along with football, I have competed in NECIS competitions for swimming, basketball and track and field, winning medals in each sport. Being part of a team allowed me to see just how important communication, teamwork, and time-management skills are.

As editor of the Yearbook in my school for three years running, I have gained exposure to the responsibilities of deadlines and working under pressure. It was challenging, but it gave me an opportunity to self-tutor myself to previously unknown photo and page editing software and to successfully work together and lead other members of the team. It is hard to describe, but seeing the finished product always reminds me why I do this elective.

Getting involved with community service has definitely been one of my highlights over the past several years. Working to renovate and construct shelters for refugees in a CAS- organized (Creativity, Action, and Service component of the IB program) building project

has allowed me to give something back to the community and grow as a person. In the coming November, I will also be attending a trip to Morocco to work at a local orphanage and help paint a local school near the city of Agadir.

I am excited by the idea of experiencing new challenges at University, such as working and living independently, and I know that I have enough ambition to succeed. I have a great hunger for expanding on and perfecting my existing economics knowledge, and I firmly believe that I can achieve that at university.

Example 2: (2015: Applicant for Education)

Since embarking on the IB Diploma program, I have developed a much more inquisitive approach to learning, and this has deepened my interest in education and the learning process. Why do I now like some subjects that I previously hated and why am I better at some subjects than others are questions that truly fascinate me. In addition, I am interested in the importance of the pre-school years to the education process and the significance of the home environment on academic development and achievement. All of these issues revolve around the formative years of childhood development, and I am certain that this is the subject area that I want to study at University.

[Note how the candidate explains exactly why they are interested in Education and how their experiences have contributed to this. Also note that their explanation is sincere and not exaggerated.]

Children are the future and I want to be a positive influence on this future. I am confident that pursuing a degree in Education will enable me to achieve this goal and I believe that my background experience has prepared me for this academic pathway. At the age of fifteen I took the initiative to undertake voluntary work under the

guidance of “Tandem”, a non-profit organization motivated by the need for the improvement of quality of life of the children and adults with disabilities, the awareness of society concerning disability and social inclusion and the empowerment of vulnerable social groups. For two consecutive years I spent two hours a week working with under-privileged children and helping them in any way I could.

The challenging situations that arose reinforced my desire to learn as much as possible, since I was able to ascertain the importance of education to a child’s subsequent development. Additionally, in order to complement my practical expertise, I did a three-week internship with a kindergarten, where I was responsible for assisting the permanent staff, in addition to supervising the children during the break and completing evaluation forms. This experience confirmed my belief that the early stages of children’s lives play a catalytic role in their development.

[Note that the professional and voluntary experience is presented in such a way as to reinforce the applicant’s interest in and suitability for the course.]

I believe that the IB program has been a good preparation for my undergraduate studies, and it has helped me to overcome some of my academic weaknesses. Due to the numerous deadlines, the IB has enhanced my time-management and organizational skills. Another vital skill that I have been taught through this Program is the Extended Essay. Having selected a particularly engaging topic, “To what extent has American cinematography reflected and shaped social attitudes towards mental illness?” I developed my critical thinking skills and was made fully aware of what a university education will entail.

It is my firm belief that a good educator must be a versatile individual with knowledge of a wide range of subjects. I have endeavored to broaden my horizons through several activities. For instance, classical ballet taught me discipline and dedication to something I

love. Furthermore, practicing the piano enabled me to realize how important a role music can play in education. I participated in the Student UNESCO Symposium in 2012, which was entitled “The Transformation of the World”. This experience gave me the opportunity to become aware of the global aspect of education and to exchange views pertaining to the topic with my peers.

I am very familiar with the organization and structure of British Universities having attended several summer courses at British Universities and I am confident that, given the opportunity, I will be able to make the most of my studies in the UK and make a valuable contribution to the shaping of children’s future through education. There is no doubt in my mind that Britain is the place, where a sound educational basis can be formed on which to build for the future.

Example 3: (2009: Applicant for Chemistry)

Few aspects of life fall outside the scope of chemistry, and this is what fascinates me about this dynamic and fundamental science subject. From a young age I have enjoyed and excelled in mathematics which reflects my logical and enquiring mind. Thus, I made the decision at high school to study mathematics as well as two sciences as part of the International Baccalaureate. It was during this part of my education that I discovered my interest in Chemistry and my desire to study the subject at a higher level. Furthermore, I developed an enthusiasm for the topics of energetics and in particular, organics.

My practical skills have been greatly enhanced through the study of Biology and Chemistry and the assessment of my abilities. Earlier this year I completed the Group 4 Project, which required me to utilize many life skills as well as calling on the skills learnt in my two science subjects. The Group 4 Project consists of a group of 8 students formulating a research question, planning, and executing

relevant experiments and finally drawing and presenting conclusions. Good teamwork and practical skills were a must, and I was pleased to be awarded very high marks. My love for chemistry stems from an appetite to understand the physical world around me and learn about, what is sometimes referred to as the central science.

The subjects I study at standard level differ greatly from my higher and subsequently they have enabled me to broaden my knowledge. This is partly the reason I chose the IB. Another salient reason as to why I chose to take the IB was because of the opportunities the course offered through the inner hexagon. My studies of Theory of Knowledge have helped me to evolve an analytical and questioning mind which I feel is very applicable in the ever-expanding field of modern chemistry. The IB is a very challenging course, but I feel it has strengthened me in many aspects.

Since starting the course in September of 2007 I have enhanced my time management and organizational skills in addition to becoming a more open minded and reflective person. Recently I have written and submitted a 3700-word extended essay about the area of circles and formulation of Pi, requiring me to exercise both my research and essay writing ability.

Presently I am working towards achieving my Duke of Edinburgh Gold Award and during my Easter holiday last year, I travelled to South Wales in the company of a group of 6 friends with the ambition of qualifying for the final assessed expedition. I believe that I showed great determination over the four days walking as well as overcoming the challenge of being self-sufficient. My other pastimes include trampolining, playing the bass guitar and practicing parkour. I love being involved in sport and through parkour I can show self-expression, control, and discipline.

A level of self-confidence, an ambitious mind, and a hardworking attitude towards improving are all qualities I feel parkour has helped

me to achieve. Over the year and 6 months I have attended the Sixth Form I have completed over 150 CAS hours by recording my pastimes and charity work in a fair-trade coffee shop. Parallel to my studies, I enjoy working as a waiter in a local hotel. This involves me being punctual, hardworking, sociable and most of all, responsible for my own thinking and acting upon this. These are all skills that I believe are vital for any perspective university student. I am greatly looking forward to the opportunities that university has to offer me both academically and socially.

My passion for Chemistry, determination and positive attitude lead me to the conclusion that studying a course at university that will both excite me and satisfy my thirst for knowledge, such as chemistry, is the next step for me and my education. My eventual aim is to become a teacher of Chemistry at GCSE level and to inject the excitement into the subject that I have discovered.

Example 4: (2019: Applicant for Liberal Arts)

As a child I disliked reading; however, when I was 8, there was one particular book that caught my attention: *The Little Prince*. From that moment onwards, my love for literature was ignited and I had entered into a whirlwind of fictional worlds. While studying and analyzing the classics from *The Great Gatsby* to *Candide*, this has exposed me to a variety of novels. My French bilingualism allowed me to study, in great depth, different texts in their original language. This sparked a new passion of mine for poetry, and introduced me to the works of Arthur Rimbaud, who has greatly influenced me. Through both reading and analyzing poetry I was able to decipher its meaning. Liberal Arts gives me the opportunity to continue to study a range of texts and authors from different periods in history, as well as related aspects of culture, economy, and society.

[Here we have a slightly longer than usual opening paragraph but, given the nature of the course being applied for, this works well. A personal story segueing from literature to modern languages to history and cultural studies shows that this student has a broad range of interests within the humanities and thus is well-suited to this course of study.]

Liberal Arts is a clear choice for me. Coming from the IB International Baccalaureate Diploma program I have studied a wide range of subjects which has provided me with a breadth of knowledge. In Theatre, I have adapted classics such as Othello by Shakespeare, and playing the role of moreover acting as Desdemona forced me to compartmentalize her complex emotions behind the early-modern English text. Studying History has taught me a number of skills, understanding the reasons behind changes in society, evaluating sources, and considering conflicting interpretations. From my interdisciplinary education I can critically analyze the world around me. Through studying Theory of Knowledge, I have developed high quality analysis using key questions and a critical mindset by questioning how and why we think and why. By going beyond the common use of reason, I have been able to deepen and broaden my understanding and apply my ways of knowing in all subjects; for example, in science I was creative in constructing my experiment (imagination) and used qualitative data (sense perception).

[Remember that students who are taking the IB Diploma, with its structure to retain a broad curriculum, are well-suited to the UK's Liberal Arts courses, as they have had practice seeing the links between subjects. In this paragraph, the applicant shows how she has done this, linking content from one subject to skills developed in another, and touching on the experience of IB Theory of Knowledge (an interdisciplinary class compulsory for all IB Diploma students) to show how she is able to see how different academic subjects overlap and share some common themes.]

Languages have always played an important role in my life. I was immersed into a French nursery even though my parents are not French speakers. I have always cherished the ability to speak another language; it is something I have never taken for granted, and it is how I individualize myself. Being bilingual has allowed me to engage with a different culture. As a result, I am more open minded and have a global outlook. This has fueled my desire to travel, learn new languages and experience new cultures. This course would provide me with the opportunity to fulfil these desires. Having written my Extended Essay in French on the use of manipulative language used by a particular character from the French classic Dangerous Liaisons I have had to apply my skills of close contextual reading and analyzing to sculpt this essay. These skills are perfectly applicable to the critical thinking that is demanded for the course.

[Within the humanities, this student has a particular background that makes her stand out, having become fluent in French while having no French background nor living in a French-speaking country. This is worth her exploring to develop her motivation for a broad course of study at university, which she does well here.]

Studying the Liberal Arts will allow me to further my knowledge in a variety of fields whilst living independently and meeting people from different backgrounds. The flexible skills I would achieve from obtaining a liberal arts degree I believe would make me more desirable for future employment. I would thrive in this environment due to my self-discipline and determination. During my school holidays I have undertaken working in a hotel as a chambermaid and this has made me appreciate the service sector in society and has taught me to work cohesively with others in an unfamiliar environment. I also took part in a creative writing course held at Keats House, where I learnt about romanticism. My commitment to extracurricular activities such as varsity football and basketball has shown me the importance of sportsmanship and camaraderie, while

GIN (Global Issue Networking) has informed me of the values of community and the importance for charitable organizations.

[The extracurricular paragraph here draws out a range of skills the student will apply to this course. Knowing that taking a broader range of subjects at a UK university requires excellent organizational skills, the student takes time to explain how she can meet these, perhaps going into slightly more detail than would be necessary for a single-honors application to spell out that she is capable of managing her time well. She then broadens this at the end by touching on some activities that have relevance for her studies.]

My academic and personal preferences have always led me to the Liberal Arts; I feel as though the International Baccalaureate, my passion and self-discipline have prepared me for higher education. From the academics, extracurriculars and social aspects, I intend to embrace the entire experience of university.

Example 5: (Applicant for Law, 2019)

Conflict is a dominant feature of our society, and I view law as a means to accommodate and arbitrate differing interests. Legislation on even seemingly minor matters, such as parking regulations, must balance competing interests – here, the rights of different groups to use the road. I wish to study law to develop my ability to critically evaluate discordant viewpoints, deepening my understanding and capacity to resolve some of the bitter disputes of our world.

Law's role in resolving conflict is most evident in court, seen in the case *Comcare v PVYW*. When I initially read about the disagreement over the compensation paid to an employee injured whilst engaging in sexual activities on a work trip, I dismissed the newspaper story as sensationalizing the trivial. Several years later, however, I observed this case's appeal in the High Court of Australia. I

witnessed the conflict over whether the worker's injury was sustained "in the course of employment", which would justify compensation. There was lengthy debate on whether a temporal connection between employment and injury was sufficient, or whether a causal link had to be proved. This deepened my respect for the law in constructing detailed, sophisticated arguments and drawing upon prior legal judgements to defend a view.

By partaking in Model United Nations events as a national finalist, I developed an interest in emerging international legal norms such as the "responsibility to protect". When researching, amending, and negotiating mock resolutions as a Russian delegate, I cautioned against the abuse of "responsibility to protect" in justifying Western military intervention and infringement of sovereignty upon the pretext of protecting civilian rights. However, I personally feel that when mass atrocity crimes such as genocide are confirmed, its impacts are so horrendous that foreign nations should intervene through a variety of measures. I wish to further study international law as an incipient attempt to balance civilian and national interests.

Studying English Literature and History in the International Baccalaureate Diploma developed my ability to closely and critically analyze written evidence to support theses. In Physics and Mathematics Higher Level, I strengthened my capacity to logically construct arguments and make conclusions, critical to forming and justifying legal arguments.

School and community activities have also instilled in me a desire to help others, which I hope to further by understanding law as an arbitrator of divisive conflicts. In adjudicating school debating, tutoring younger peers, and acting as piano accompanist at chapel services, I have shared my time and skills to benefit others. This is also evident in my role as a Senior Prefect and an organizer of school charity events.