



# The benefits of the International Baccalaureate Diploma for Latin and Classics in the Sixth Form

by Simon Trafford

In spite of its world-wide reach, the International Baccalaureate (IB) is still a relatively unknown quantity in many schools in the UK. Even if teachers know of the IB, very few teachers know how it works and even fewer have actually taught it. As a result, not enough Classicists realise how beneficial the IB can be for the teaching of Latin. This article aims at highlighting three main reasons why Classics teachers should be championing the International Baccalaureate in their sixth forms.

While the numbers of students taking Latin at GCSE continues to rise steadily – although the new 9-1 GCSEs may threaten this fragile upturn – the same cannot be said at A Level, which is especially marked when we factor in the state sector. A significant reason for the upturn in numbers at GCSE has, of course, to do with WJEC offering their Level 2 certificates, while OCR continues to be the only exam board offering the A Level. Until another exam board enters the A Level market in the same way WJEC did at GCSE level and offers a different approach, it is difficult to see how Latin can increase its appeal at this level. Add to this the fact that Language A Levels, and Latin in particular, continue to be perceived as a tough option. There is also a well-publicised shortage of teachers capable of offering Latin, especially teachers able to offer it at post-16.

So, what can we do to increase Latin's appeal and the numbers of students continuing Latin after GCSE? What can

we do to make it a sensible and logical option for students at post-16? One option – admittedly, not open to all – is championing a different route for post-16 education: the International Baccalaureate. Gradually schools are moving down this road and promoting an international, broad and comprehensive education in their sixth form. And it should be us as Classics teachers at the forefront. Why? What will follow is a discussion of three key reasons: i) All students have to take a foreign language; ii) Potential for more periods of Latin; iii) The Curriculum.

I hope what follows may offer Classicists another route that they perhaps were not aware was open to them, and may provide food for thought.

- 1) All students have to take a foreign language, and Latin or Classical Greek can be that option.

I am lucky enough to work in a school that supports the Classics, in particular Latin. The school does this through the Languages options block. I will now take a moment to explain how the system works at my school to provide some relevant context. In Year 7 all students take either Japanese or Mandarin. In Year 8 students can opt to take Latin as their European language, which also includes French, German and Spanish as options. Once they opt for their European language, students cannot drop it until they have taken a GCSE in it. This

is same for the Asian languages in Year 7. Thus, all students will end up with a GCSE in two languages. This structure can be either a blessing or a curse, depending on how you play it as a classroom practitioner and as a department. On the one hand, you have a set number of classes all the way through Years 8-11, which is positive and provides stability; on the other, you could have a group of students who hate your subject and you are stuck with them for four years. The latter possibility is less likely, because the students have chosen your subject (and obviously we are all outstanding teachers!), but the onus is very much on us to make the lessons as fun and engaging as possible to ensure the students stay on your side for the four years.

In our department, we are lucky enough to have one class of 25 pupils going through in every year into Year 11. This has recently increased to two classes for our current Year 8s. Currently we thus have a relatively modest number of students to draw from for the sixth form. This is exacerbated by there being so many other languages in the school to opt for over Latin, including Mandarin, Japanese and Spanish, which are all popular and well-liked languages with exciting trips attached to them.

But, in spite of this relatively modest number of students in Year 11 to draw from, in the sixth form we have 40 students taking Latin (20 in each year). The vast majority of these are

internal students, with only a couple of external. That amounts to a retention rate of around 70%-80% each year. Some of my students opt for Latin because they love the subject and take it at Higher Level; while others do it because they need to take a language, prefer it to the other languages, and so take it at Standard Level. If it were not for the IB and students being obliged to take a language, we would only attract around half of students who are currently taking Latin.

- 2) There is the potential for more periods of Latin in the sixth form.

For those who are unfamiliar with the International Baccalaureate, I will briefly outline how the system works. First, students taking the IB choose three subjects at Higher Level (HL) and three at Standard Level (SL). The subjects are grouped in six blocks. Students have to take English, a foreign language, Humanities, Science, Maths, and they get a free choice from the previous five blocks or they choose an Art subject.

The suggested teaching time allotted to each subject amounts to five hours a week for HL subjects and three hours a week for SL. The IB maintains that all subjects can merge HL and SL classes for three periods a week, teaching the HL/SL components together. This is feasible for some subjects, but not for all. As a result of difficulties, whether concerning the timetable, class sizes, practicalities of day-to-day teaching or simply how the IB syllabi differentiate the HL and SL components, schools can and do teach HL and SL classes separately. What often results from such complications is 8 hours of teaching per week for HL and SL, rather than 5 hours in both Year 12 and 13. Naturally this can help maintain small departments, like many Classics departments, and thus provides an extra boost to the number of periods available for Classics teachers.

- 3) The Curriculum

So far I have only discussed the rather mercenary reasons for why the International Baccalaureate is of benefit to Classics teachers, whether it is the possibility of more students taking the subject or the possibility of more periods being available for the teaching of Latin.

But, by far the most attractive reason for championing the IB is the curriculum and the subtle, but very real, differences from the A Level.

## Paper 1: Language (Unseen Translation) (35%)

The greatest difference from traditional unseen translation exams is that dictionaries are permitted. The IB is very clear: this is not a vocabulary test, but an assessment of how well students can translate a piece of unprepared Latin. Indeed, how often have we or do we, as academic classicists, sit down to translate or prepare a piece of Latin verse or prose without recourse to a dictionary? The Unseen exam is therefore far more realistic to the demands Classics students will face when they reach university and beyond.

The IB is also very fair in what information teachers and students are given to help them prepare for the Unseen translation. First, you have the option of either prose or verse translation. Secondly, we are told the option for prose and verse (Cicero's speeches; Ovid's *Metamorphoses*). This allows the teacher to get students prepared for the style of each author, as well as the peculiarities of each author's style.

## Paper 2: Literature (45%)

The options available for study are the greatest draw for me. They are not only a fantastic way to attract students to the subject and to get them thinking about taking it at Higher Level but the options are also a wonderful way of maintaining my own intellectual curiosity. My passion is thus ever-renewed and I can convey this to my students as we work through the texts. The range of options available also helps me tailor the selection of texts to my own students, their interests and requirements.

The selection of texts is thoughtful and thought-provoking. Rather than simply an author or text (although due to popular demand, there is always a Virgil's *Aeneid* option), options are often thematic. Current options available include: Virgil's *Aeneid* 1 and *Georgics* 4; History (Tacitus

and Suetonius); Love Poetry (Catullus, Tibullus, Propertius); Women (a selection of Cicero, Livy, Ovid and Virgil); Good Living (Lucretius, Horace and Seneca). And these options are on a three-year cycle, so the range of texts is renewed, which helps keep things fresh.

## Internal Assessment: Research Dossier (25%)

This is an intelligent and wonderfully IB task. First, this is not an essay, but a dossier which collects and analyses ancient sources to answer a question. This is thus something very distinct from other subjects. The research dossier asks students to question how we know what we know about the ancient world. For instance, why was chariot racing so popular in ancient Rome? What did the Romans do for us Britons? What role did music play in daily life during the Principate?

Students are required to gather between 10-12 ancient sources to analyse and from which they will then be able to answer their question. I give my students freedom to choose their own research topics, so that they can tailor it to their own interests or perhaps choice of university course – as long as the topic is sensible and workable as a research dossier.

The beauty of the task rests on a couple of factors. First, students are required to constantly ask themselves what ancient sources actually show. What does the Zliten mosaic tell us about gladiatorial contests? How does it relate to Seneca's view of gladiatorial contests expressed in *De Brevitate Vitae*?

Secondly, it is important for students to tackle the difference between primary and secondary sources – something that is never as easy as you would think, even when it has been explained several times. But, it is for such a reason as this that the task is so useful. I always know I have cracked it when one of my students asks me if Plutarch counts as a primary source for Julius Caesar. I reply that for the purposes of the task he does because he is an ancient writer. I then get the response: 'But, he is writing in Greek over a century later? This makes no sense.' This is when I know truly

that they are thinking of all the limitations of the source material and the reliability of different primary sources.

The IB also offers Classical Greek and Classical Civilisation (known as Classical Greek and Roman Studies), and schools are also pushing for the IB to introduce *ab initio* Latin and Classical Greek to give the ancient languages parity

with the modern languages. There are thus all the traditional Classics routes (and potentially more) on offer with the IB, and we should bear in mind that the more students that take classical subjects in the sixth form, the more are likely to continue at university. It is hoped that classicists will see more clearly the benefits of the IB for Latin and the Classics generally and that, while we

cannot necessarily enforce a change, it is really something all of us should champion in our schools when the opportunity arises.

**Dr Simon Trafford, Head of  
Classics, Dartford Grammar School  
strafford@dartfordgrammarschool.  
org.uk**