The IB is not just affected by globalization; it has become a part of it. Its programmes are to be found in nearly three-quarters of the world’s countries, and one reason for the high reputation of the DP is the international benchmarking of its curriculum and assessment. The IB does not yet offer the educational equivalent of a “Big Mac and a Coke” but it does provide a globally popular, respected and marketable pre-university qualification. Consequently, in some countries the IB stands in competition with the national system as part of a free educational market. And in common with other dimensions of globalized activity there are many who are simply unable to engage, unable to gain access to what some might regard as a privileged club.

Refining the message: Meeting the challenges of a globalized world

Four major challenges seem likely to dominate the thinking of international educators as they consider the implications of a globalized world: diversity, complexity, sustainability and inequality.

Diversity

“Global citizens seek out diversity, welcome diversity, even celebrate diversity.” How many times have we read that, or something similar, in the mission statements, straplines and letterheads of IB World Schools? The growing impact of migration makes us more conscious of human diversity than at any time in the past. There is no longer much of a fit between national frontiers, language and culture. There is an increasing chance that we will live next to, work in a team with, play soccer against, choose as a lifelong partner, someone of a different ethnic origin. In the United Kingdom, for example, close to 1 in 10 of the population is now from an ethnic minority group; a generation ago the figure was 1 in 50.

What do IB students think about a situation that many people see as a threat to their job, to their way of life, even to their security? Is there a moral argument for seeking out, welcoming and celebrating diversity? What does history have to tell us about the way in which our comparisons with “others” affect our own self-perception? Economists tell us that most economies depend upon migrant labour; scientists insist that a more diverse gene pool will ensure the maintenance of the healthy human species; and the artist will point to the enrichment that ethnic diversity brings to a community. Happily there is no shortage of world literature that explores each of these themes.
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Serious discussion of these opinions requires a multidisciplinary approach so that IB students can approach the complex and controversial challenge of cultural diversity from an intellectual rather than an emotional viewpoint. There are good reasons for celebrating diversity but they are not always self-evident and they need debating from the foundation of different disciplinary understandings, which the IB encourages.

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Complexity

As well as becoming more diverse, life is also becoming more complex: more information becomes cheaply and readily accessible; official, canonical interpretations are more frequently challenged; and a multitude of individual opinions is given a public hearing using the new digital media. The blacks and whites of the 20th century are giving way to much more complex shades of grey, whatever the issue: building more nuclear power stations, developing stem cell research, pursuing the war in Afghanistan, making sense of the politics of Iran.

Research suggests that there are significant differences between Eastern and Western cultures in their responses to controversial issues. For example, the Chinese response to contradiction is to moderate their opinions and seek a compromise; Americans tend to respond by polarizing their beliefs. The IB encourages students to acquire critical-thinking skills from the earliest age and to apply them to a range of international issues, to learn the skills of negotiation and to understand that flexibility and compromise are essential qualities in a globalized world.

Sustainability

The widespread recognition that the planet’s capacity to sustain life is being put at serious risk has surely become a defining feature of the 21st century. Human activity is destroying habitats, using up irreplaceable resources, accumulating waste and polluting the atmosphere at an uncontrollable pace. Nowhere are the risks more evident, but the causes and possible remedies more argued about, than in the
controversial area of climate change, which promises to dominate the 21st century in much the same way as the threat of nuclear war dominated the second half of the 20th century.

Five Minds for the Future

In his book *Five Minds for the Future*, Professor Howard Gardner describes five intellectual minds that people will need if they are to “thrive in the world during the eras to come”. These are:

- the disciplined mind, which has mastered (over about 10 years) at least one of the major schools of thought
- the synthesizing mind, which brings to bear on an issue information from a variety of disciplines
- the creating mind, which breaks new ground, asks different questions and proposes new solutions
- the respectful mind, which explores, respects and tries to make sense of the differences between different groups of people
- the ethical mind, which recognizes one’s responsibilities as a worker and a citizen.

Gardner’s minds form a valuable checklist against which to measure the IB’s programmes, in particular their balance between disciplinary and trans-disciplinary learning, the application of critical-thinking skills, intercultural understanding and the ethical values that underlie the programmes.

Scientists, who have little experience of such behaviour, are finding it hard to get their message across in order to counter the aggressive tactics of the so-called “climate skeptics”. Politicians are finding it hard to accept the inevitable material sacrifices that will follow from carbon reductions, the very idea of resource contraction taking them into unknown territory. The media are finding it hard to report in a balanced and informative way on technically complex issues. The United Nations, called upon to discharge what is arguably the most important responsibility in its history, is finding it hard to keep member states on board.
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The IB insists on the study of science in each of its programmes and it also encourages students to reflect on the reliability of scientific evidence and the scope of scientific investigations. But science alone will not solve this problem. Climate change is a global issue that requires international cooperation, which IB students are well prepared to exercise, as well as a philosophy of lifelong learning that develops responsible, caring and contributing citizens, capable of bringing about change.

Inequality

Globalization is producing winners and losers and, as the world grows richer, the inequality gap between and within countries is growing wider. The statistics make depressing reading however they are presented. In the United States, for example, the richest 1% of the population own over one third of the country’s wealth. The world’s richest 20% are responsible for 77% of private consumption; the middle 40% consume 22% and the poorest 20% consume just under 2%. As inequality deepens, the fabric of society is damaged as the wealthy go their own way, weakening their commitment to the community’s shared services and facilities, including education.

But all is not lost. In sub-Saharan Africa the participation rate in primary education has increased from 50% in 2000 to 71% in 2006 thanks to the Education For All initiative of UNESCO. This is still a long way from achieving the UN’s millennium goal of full participation by 2015, but encouraging progress is being made; given the will, the deepest social problems can be solved. What we need are social entrepreneurs who (in the memorable description of Thomas Friedman) “combine a business school brain with a social worker’s heart”.

According to the IB mission statement, its programmes “encourage students across the world to become active, compassionate and lifelong learners”. This statement brings together knowledge, concern and action—three qualities that lie at the heart of the IB experience and at the heart of a solution to the world’s dangerous inequalities.

International education has grown to maturity in a privileged and protected sector of the world’s economy. International schools have been described as “atolls in a sea of cultures”, sometimes isolated from the local conditions of deprivation and social injustice. In spreading their influence into the mainstreams of the world’s education systems, will the IB’s programmes be sufficiently robust to address the inequalities that exist? Will they be able to contribute to the much-needed reform of education in many parts of the developing world?