

## ACADEMIC RESULTS: ANSWERING FEARS

### Introduction

Every year, when academic results are posted, the school community expresses some anxiety, especially if the results are perceived to be 'worse' than in previous years. This is not surprising, as it reflects the uncertainty and insecurity many families have about their children's future.

Questions invariably include:

- What is happening at the school?
- What is happening to standards?
- Will my child get a decent diploma?
- Will they qualify for a place at university?
- Will they get into a decent university?
- Will they eventually be employable?
- Is the school I have chosen good enough?

These concerns are real, and perfectly legitimate. The College welcomes this opportunity to explain the assessment procedure in more detail, as well as to discuss results in general and the IBDP and IGCSE at Waterford specifically.

The philosophy of education at Waterford is reflected in paragraphs 10 to 15 of the General Information Brochure (GIB).

Some extracts:

- "WKUWCSA strives to lay the foundation for its students to become responsible citizens who have the skills, knowledge and sense of purpose to provide leadership in both Africa and the world."
- "We passionately believe that all young people must be given access to education of the highest standard to enable them to realise their potential."
- "Waterford highly values its socio-economic and cultural diversity".
- "This aspirational mission of the school is realised through the implementation of the UWC Educational Model..." (The full version of the Educational Model can be found on the College website.)
- "We continue to strive to promote personal development including development of each individual's intellectual, creative and physical potential, spiritual awareness and moral integrity, and students' willingness to act responsibly according to their beliefs, abilities and opportunities."
- "We continue to strive to celebrate the richness and opportunity that comes with living, learning and serving in a community drawn together from a wide diversity of backgrounds."

It is important to firmly place any discussion of WK's academic results in the above philosophical context. As a UWC, academic results do not reflect the entirety of WK's educational programme. Our purpose as a UWC is to educate for "peace and a sustainable future" suggesting that we educate far beyond the narrow confines of an examination system or a set curriculum. This philosophy is also reflected in the pedagogy and curriculum of the International Baccalaureate, and it is for this reason that the IBDP includes non-academic elements such as the CAS, which is a central part of the assessment of the diploma.

This notwithstanding, at Waterford (as is the case with most schools the world over) the release of academic results is met with great anticipation on the part of some. Parents interrogate the results and when they do not meet expectations, call the school to answer. There is no easy answer to these concerns as there are a number of different factors that impact the results.

It is important, when assessing results, to consider those factors in a particular context.

### External factors affecting examination results

It is important to understand that schools usually do not have much control over many of the factors that impact on quality of education. Such factors include:

- The quality of the primary schooling the student had (for those in secondary school)
- The social background of the students
- The neighbourhood of the school
- The family background of the students

Waterford, as most other schools, has little real control over the above factors, except that the school does have control over its own admissions (see below).

### **Internal factors affecting results**

There are certain factors affecting the results that the school does have more control over.

**Selection of students:** It should be noted that WK is in a position to decide its own admissions, unlike the process in most national systems of education. If academic performance at the previous school were the only criteria by which students are accepted at WK, top academic results could be virtually guaranteed. But, given the historical mission of the school, it is clear that simple academic performance is not the only criteria by which students are selected. Furthermore, it is difficult to accurately predict the academic potential of a student at the age of 11, as s/he will be undergoing many physical and emotional changes throughout adolescence before doing the IBDP some five years later. For this reason Waterford does not have automatic progression from Form 5 into the IBDP programme, and all Form 5 students wishing to enrol in the programme have to make a fresh application. Every year some students choose not to apply for the IBDP programme, while others who apply are not accepted into the programme. A number of students are offered a place even though teachers are aware that they will struggle significantly with the academic features of the IBDP.

**The quality of the leadership in the school:** Waterford appoints the best available applicants for positions of responsibility. Just over 50% of all staff hold some position of either residential or curriculum responsibility. Professional development opportunities are explored and taken up wherever possible, both inside the country, regionally and even internationally from time to time. There is a strong spirit of collegiality and teamwork within the school, with established formal structures to enhance the quality of the leadership across the school. Most of those appointed to leadership positions hold higher degrees in addition to their professional qualifications.

**The quality of the teaching:** The college hires the best possible available teachers from Swaziland, the region and further afield. Many have further degrees in the subjects they teach in addition to their professional qualifications. There is a strong spirit of cooperation between departments, and ongoing critical reflection on teaching and learning processes. All teachers undergo training, many through online courses offered by the IBDP, and face to face IGCSE courses when these are available. In any given year, 25% of our teachers are doing online courses.

**The curriculum:** The curriculums for Forms 4 and 5 and IB 1 and 2 are determined by the external certificates that the students are enrolled for, vis-a-vis the IGCSE and the IBDP. To a large extent, teaching and learning in these four year groups are determined by those external curriculums. The Forms 1 to 3 curriculum at Waterford provides an essential bridge between the primary school educational background of our admissions in Forms 1 and 2, and the start of the IGCSE curriculum in Form 4. Our Forms 1 and 2 students come from about ten different backgrounds and the Waterford curriculum is designed to take cognisance of this range of backgrounds and prepare all students to manage the IGCSE curriculum in Form 4.

**Quality of the facilities:** Waterford is able to provide the best possible facilities required for the delivery of the curriculum. The school carefully assesses new technology and pedagogical instruments, avoiding

fashion and fad and focusing on what will work in Waterford's context, based on the professional judgement of the teaching staff. Salaries only account for 63% of income, providing the school with significant funding for the facilities required for the delivery of high quality teaching and learning.

Motivation and commitment of each student: As discussed above, there is some control over the selection of students to Waterford; however, the motivation and personal circumstances of each new applicant cannot be accurately determined at the outset. Every year the school is surprised by so called 'weaker' students who achieve wonderful results, while other students who were considered 'stronger' do not deliver as anticipated. This is hardly surprising, given the fact that psychologists and scientists are still trying to understand the phase of life we call adolescence.

Family support of each student: Another imponderable that the school has to deal with is the family circumstances of each child. There have been orphaned students who have done fantastically well despite the most challenging and modest of personal circumstances, while others from the most privileged of backgrounds frustrate with their under-achievement.

Access to books, materials, resources: Whilst Waterford has no control over access to books, materials and resources in the home and outside of school, we do ensure that students have equal and ready access to the materials required for effective learning at the school.

Individual effort: The results are also impacted by each individual's attitude to his/her own studies. Keeping up with the demands of the syllabus by meeting deadlines, preparing adequately and timeously for tests and examination, level of application to assessment requirements throughout the year will all impact the eventual results of the student.

Culture of any given year group: Any experienced school-based educationalist will confirm that there is always a unique culture and attitude in any given year group. This can vary from a mature outlook to a more light-hearted attitude. Some groups may present as more interested in the social elements of being in a boarding school together and non-academic activities rather than focusing on academics and enrichment activities, and as such impact the culture of endeavour and hard work within the group as a whole.

Determining the quality of education in any school (or indeed in any educational system) as a whole, and especially understanding the academic results in any particular cohort of students, is no easy matter, and has defied the best social scientists, applying considerable skills to such an endeavour. For this reason educationalists are generally sceptical of assessment systems and academic performance measures. It is notoriously difficult to analyse the various factors that impact on results and performance, and to identify any single reason for why students perform the way they do. This is the reason most educationalists reject any form of league tabling (listing in rank order the performance of schools) in any system. League tabling was introduced in the UK in the 1990s, but simply proves, year after year, that well-resourced (usually private) schools, serving the wealthiest five percent of the population, and whose parents are usually degreed professionals, are the 'better' schools. Unsurprisingly, commentators consider league tabling a better marker of social inequality than of actual educational performance.

### **Analysing results: what do the teachers do when results are released?**

When results are released, each department thoroughly analyses these results and examines the feedback from the IB in the various components of each subject.

Sometimes further feedback is requested from the IB when teachers are particularly unhappy about a set of results. Such feedback involves extensive discussion in the departments, reflecting on teaching and learning, and making the necessary adjustments in teaching, learning and internal assessments. The school mitigates any problems identified. The school's support is identified and implemented, so that the professional staff are an integral part of this learning community. There are also processes and procedures for follow up on any complaints raised by parents and, more importantly, by students. These may include

class visits, student surveys and identifying a remedial plan if required. The process of analysis of results is thorough, and staff spend many hours on this exercise.

- We track the progress of each student from the time he or she enters the programme until he or she graduates. As such we have a clear overview, at the end of the Form 4 and IB1 year already, as to the expected outcomes for that year group.
- The IBDP and IGCSE coordinators correlate the results and make them available to the staff.
- The IBDP and IGCSE coordinators and the DPA consider the results for each subject and each subject component in comparison to the results from previous years. Anomalies are discussed and context considered in determining our response.
- Teachers reflect on their own results: Each teacher examines his or her student's results in terms of the Grade he or she predicted for each student. The teacher will then try to determine if there are any areas of concern which require attention. He or she then writes a report for the HOD.
- The HOD meets with each teacher in the Department. (This is a long task for some Departments as there are 10 or more teachers in some Departments and HODs are still carrying their full academic load while managing the start of a new academic year). The HOD discusses the results for each class with each teacher and reads the teacher's report.
- The HOD then writes a report for the DPA.
- The DPA meets with each HOD to discuss the results, identify any concerns, determines the support needed and the best way forward for all students and their teachers.
- The DPA will meet with the PCs, the HODs and, if necessary, individual teachers to put in place support and remedial measures should the need for this have been identified.
- The DPA then writes a full report for GC which is published in the school report for the whole community at the end of term.

### **Understanding the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP)**

Assessment is complex; apart from the various components of the diploma itself there are components of each subject; written examinations, oral or performance examinations, lab demonstrations etc. Anybody who has taken a child through the IB will know these complexities. It is also very demanding on the students, far more demanding than the IGCSE curriculum. There is a mismatch between IGCSE and its academic demands especially regarding commitment and motivation.

The IBDP has the following criteria which must be met in order for the Diploma to be awarded:

- CAS requirements have been met.
- Candidate's total points are at least 24.
- A TOK Essay has been submitted.
- An Extended Essay has been submitted.
- A grade E has not been awarded for one or both of theory of knowledge and the extended essay.
- All required IAs have been submitted.
- There is not any grade 1 awarded in a subject/level.
- Grade 2 has not been awarded three or more times (HL or SL).
- Grade 3 or below has not been awarded four or more times (HL or SL).
- Candidate has gained at least 12 points on HL subjects.
- Candidate has gained at least 9 points on SL subjects.

There are further factors that influence the award of the IBDP, which are largely beyond the control of the school.

Parental aspirations: Parents and Guardians wanting the very best for their child and desiring the educational opportunities offered by the Shelby Davis Scholars programme do not always pay attention to the advice of the professional educators or, in some extreme cases, the aspirations of their child. They will insist that their child must do the IBDP. Since the Shelby Davis scholarship more and more of our families

are seeing this IBDP as the only option for their students putting undue strain on the school when they are refused an offer of a place including appeals both to the GC and even to the UWC international office. If they are accepted into the IBDP they will sometimes insist on subject choices which include two higher level sciences or standard level Maths when the strengths of the student lies in the languages or humanities. Too many students who do not get the Diploma should not have done HL Sciences or even SL Maths yet they remain prompted to by unrealistic career aspirations which are difficult to shake.

Declining resilience: Students require more and more support with basic organisational and self-management skills.

Increased need for pastoral support: This is a world-wide phenomenon being experienced by many of our sister colleges as well as by WK. There is a marked increase in students with mental health concerns requiring attention.

Lowered IGCSE grade boundaries lead to a false sense of security and belief that a student will manage the IBDP. Parents in particular are difficult to convince that a B (or even an A) for a subject at IGCSE level is not an indicator of success at IBDP level

NC Students whose admission to UWC is out of our control – students with language or trauma issues. Governing council gave us a mandate to be more generous in accepting our own Form 5 students into the IBDP programme.

### **The IGCSE**

The IGCSE is a curriculum offered by Cambridge University. The examination of this curriculum leads to the award of the International Certificate in Education (ICE). In order to achieve the ICE a student must take a first language, a second language, a humanity, a science, mathematics and a creative art. Students who do not meet these subject criteria will receive a transcript from Cambridge with details of subjects passed. At Waterford our subject choice ensures that all our students qualify for the ICE.

The grade boundaries (what determines an A or a B) changes for each subject and for each exam session based on the world averages and the adjustment of results to a bell curve. Thus in English Language an A grade may start at 70% while in English Literature it may start at 80%.

The grade boundaries for IGCSEs have decreased over the last few years (a B in Mathematics in 2017 started at 51%) creating the illusion that a student is far more capable (and thus able to do the IBDP) than is in fact the case. This is why it is imperative that the insights of the professional educators must be taken into account when considering a student's admission to the IBDP.

The merit of this programme is that it still provides an exit point from secondary education for those students wanting to continue elsewhere with AS or A levels or other educational routes (UNISWA, NUL, NUB and some SA Technical Universities accept IGCSEs for admission to tertiary education programmes). IGCSEs needed for tertiary education usually include Mathematics, Language A, Language B, a Science subject and a humanities subject.

### **Conclusion**

It is hoped that with a greater understanding of the issues impacting examination results in the school, the broader Waterford community will have more insight whenever results are released.

**Stephen Lowry and Joanne de Koning**  
**28 March 2018**