

Is the IB DP programme more academically rigorous than A levels?

Both International A levels and the IB Diploma (DP) qualification are widely respected routes into higher education and recognised by universities worldwide (see our myth buster factsheet *Are IB students preferred over A level students for entrance to the world's top universities?*).

They are, however, structured differently and it is misunderstanding around this that possibly gives rise to this headline.

How do the two international curricula compare on subject breadth and depth?

IB DP students study six subjects in years 11 and 12 alongside compulsory Theory of Knowledge (TOK), CAS (creativity, action, service) assignments and extended essay components. Selecting at least one subject from six groups¹ – Studies in language and literature, Language acquisition, Individuals and societies, Sciences, Maths and the Arts – IB DP students will only take three, or occasionally four, subjects at higher level and will take the other three, or two, at standard level.

IB DP students are expected to 'demonstrate a greater body of knowledge, understanding and skills at higher level'² with standard level subjects taking up 150 teaching

hours and subjects at higher level taking 240 teaching hours. Some countries will specify the levels and subjects IB students must take – for example, in Switzerland, all students must take either Maths or a Science at higher level.

In comparison, students following a British international curriculum will study between five and ten subjects at International GCSE and then typically progress to study three or four International A levels in years 11 and 12, from a choice of over 20 subjects including English Language/Literature, Languages, Sciences, Maths, Humanities and Arts subjects. Each International A level subject takes a total of 360 teaching hours.³

For university entrance, IB students typically require the full IB Diploma, which means passing all six components including the compulsory TOK, CAS and extended essay.⁴ Typically for university entrance in the UK and Europe, International A level students require three A levels. Some students may take a fourth A level, for example in Further Maths or a modern language, but this is not standard practice.

However, university courses that require specific subjects at A level or equivalent will typically require IB students to take these subjects at higher level, so exactly like students following an International A level curriculum, IB DP students will likely only have three subjects to count towards subject-specific entry requirements at the universities of their choice.

How do they compare on academic rigour?

Both qualifications are academically rigorous however they differ on programmed teaching time, compulsory and optional components and whether additional programmes and qualifications can be added around them.

IB DP Programme

The teaching time for three International A levels is higher than the teaching time for the comparative three higher level subjects within the IB DP – 1,080 teaching hours for three International A levels versus 720 hours for three higher level IB DP subjects.

However, the IB Diploma involves more formalised teaching time overall as it includes additional calls on students' time to also complete three standard level subjects, the compulsory TOK assignments, extended essay and CAS commitments.

In designing its programme in this way, the IB Diploma programme supports the IB's philosophy that students must study a variety of subjects to broaden their general as well as specialist knowledge.

International A levels

Pearson Edexcel International A levels (IAL[®]) are modular qualifications, each made up of four or six separate units – two or three AS level units and two or three A2 level units. Students can complete individual units at different times but typically, they will complete half of the units in their first year of study (International AS levels) and the remaining units in their second year of study (International A2 levels). This means that for a single International A level subject, students may sit up to six examination papers. They can also re-sit single units if they do not get the grade they want, to ensure that when they make their university applications, they have the best set of grades possible.

A big difference between the two curricula is that sitting International A level units in a modular way frees up students' time to focus on extra curricula components such as additional language acquisition, extended project qualifications⁵ and global impact programmes such as the Duke of Edinburgh's International Award⁶.

With the IB Diploma, similar components are compulsory – hence the suggestion that the IB DP is a more rigorous programme; with International A levels, these components are optional add-ons and so rarely factored in when time commitments are compared across the two curricula.

Is the IB Diploma more difficult than International A levels?

On the face of it, the IB's longer programmed teaching hours, the requirement to study six subjects (three at higher level), and the additional TOK, CAS and extended

essay components mean that IB students are often juggling a higher workload than their International A level counterparts, if those IAL students are not studying for additional qualifications or undertaking extracurricular programmes alongside their International A level studies.

However, the higher compulsory and timebound workload for IB students can have an adverse effect and mean that some IB students end up with relatively low grades (24-30 points). For example, it has been suggested that around 10-15% of students taking the IB Diploma fail to reach the 24-point threshold for the qualification to be awarded.⁷

Importantly, the subject content within International A levels is equally as challenging as the subject content within the IB Diploma and, with one and half times the number of teaching hours required to complete each International A level compared to a DP subject taken at higher level, there is more scope for International A level students to study their chosen subjects to a greater depth.

Also, because International A level students study three or four subjects and can complete unit exams flexibly, they are able to re-take units in pursuit of better grades when they need to, and have more flexibility to balance their subject workload along side extracurricular programmes or additional qualifications. This can often mean that International A level students have more control over their ability to graduate with the highest grades.⁸

The verdict? Think again!

Although the two curricula differ in structure, they are comparable in academic rigour and learning outcomes. The main difference is that Pearson Edexcel International A level students retain more flexibility over what they study, when they are examined and the additional components they take to enrich their curriculum whereas IB Diploma students have far less flexibility over what they study and when they are examined as all components are compulsory and contribute to overall end assessments and points awarded.

A more balanced headline would be:

"Both the IB DP and International A levels are academically rigorous programmes. The IB DP introduces breadth through compulsory components whereas International A level students have the flexibility to design their own, equally broad but bespoke programme of study to sit alongside their International A levels."

References

- 1 IB Diploma students are required to choose one subject from each of the six academic areas, including one from Individuals and societies. They can choose a second subject from each academic area except the arts. [IB Diploma Programme, IB Organisation](#).
- 2 [The IB Diploma Programme curriculum](#), IB Organisation.
- 3 [Pearson Edexcel International A levels \(IAL[®]\)](#) comprise 180 teaching hours at IAS level plus 180 teaching hours at IA2 level. These two levels make up the full International A level.
- 4 European universities require IB students to have passed the full IB Diploma. Some UK and US universities are flexible over which elements IB students must have passed.
- 5 Designed to develop students' critical, reflective, problem-solving and independent learning skills, the Pearson Edexcel Level 3 [Extended Project](#) qualification is the equivalent to half an International A level and is highly valued by universities and supports students with the transition to higher education or the world of work. Read more about [the Project Qualification from Pearson](#).
- 6 [The Duke of Edinburgh's International Award](#) is a global framework for young people to make a difference in their world. Operating in more than 130 countries and territories, the Awards' framework includes physical, skills and voluntary service components. Students develop transferable skills, cultivate a sense of adventure and volunteer in their community so that they can find their purpose, passion and place in the world.
- 7 [A levels or IB?](#) Foundation College Greece.
- 8 The highest A level grade requirements for entry onto undergraduate courses at top UK universities such as Oxford, Cambridge or Imperial College are 3 International or UK A levels at A* A* A*. The same universities typically require more than 40 points in the IB Diploma, which is roughly equivalent to students achieving mostly 7s in six (rather than three) subjects.

Further reading

Read more in our series of myth busting factsheets:

Is the IB the only curriculum where students foster an international mindset?

Are IB students better prepared for the transition to university than A level students?

Does the IB DP programme give students more choice over degree subjects than A level students?

Are IB students preferred over A level students for entrance to the world's top universities?

Are IB DP students more likely than similar A level students to enrol in a top 20 UK higher education institution?

Are IB students more likely to be admitted into the United States' most prestigious universities?

Are British qualifications only useful if you want to study at a British university?

Are you only a real international school if you offer an IB curriculum?

IAL is a registered trademark of Pearson Education Ltd in the UK and other countries.

