



MYTH BUSTERS

THE IB VS  
INTERNATIONAL  
A LEVELS

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

And moreover, is the IB the only curriculum where students learn to think critically, develop independent enquiry skills and become active members of their communities?

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?*).

However, a common claim is that only the IB curriculum develops students' critical thinking and independent research skills and provides them with opportunities to complete service learning experiences alongside their subject learning.

This is not the case, and it is misunderstanding about how the two programmes are structured that probably gives rise to this headline.

### How do the two international curricula compare on non-subject-specific components?

IB DP students study six subjects<sup>1</sup> alongside additional, compulsory Theory of Knowledge (TOK), CAS (creativity, action, service) assignments and extended essay components as part of their Diploma. Similar components are not mandatory within International A level programmes; rather Pearson Edexcel International A level students – either independently or through the extracurricular programmes and additional qualifications offered by their school<sup>2</sup> – can design their own, bespoke programme of study to sit alongside their International A levels, which can be broadly equivalent to the components studied at IB Diploma.

#### CAS (creativity, activity and service)

For example, the CAS component of the IB Diploma requires IB students to take part in over 150 hours of non-academic activity with a reflective writing component.<sup>3</sup>

International schools offering Pearson Edexcel International A levels (IAL<sup>®</sup>) will also include sporting, cultural and volunteering activities within their curriculum – such as the Duke of Edinburgh's International Award<sup>4</sup> which at gold level requires 12-18 months' participation and a significant voluntary service element alongside physical and skills development components.

## Extended Essay

The Extended Essay component of the IB Diploma is an independent, self-directed piece of research, finishing with a 4,000-word essay.<sup>5</sup> Students investigate a topic which relates to one of their six DP subjects, or they choose a world studies topic. Through this work, students develop skills in formulating a research question, conducting independent research, communicating ideas and developing an argument.

Pearson Edexcel International A level students can add a very similar component, the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ),<sup>6</sup> into their curriculum. The EPQ is an independent research project carried out on a subject of the student's choice and submitted along with a presentation about their research. The Level 3 EPQ is equivalent to half an International A level and widely recognised and respected by universities. It gives students the opportunity to develop critical, reflective, problem-solving and independent learning skills through the planning, research and evaluation of a self-selected project, finishing with one of four project outcomes: a 5,000-word dissertation, an investigation, a performance or an artefact.

## TOK (Theory of Knowledge)

The TOK component within the IB Diploma asks students to reflect on the nature of knowledge and is assessed through an exhibition and a 1,600-word essay.<sup>7</sup> It is central to the education philosophy of the IB Diploma and as such, there isn't a direct equivalent component for International A level students. TOK encourages IB DP students to think critically and ask questions, for example: 'How do we know?' 'What counts as evidence for x?' 'What does this mean in the real world?' to develop students' 'thoughtful and purposeful inquiry' into different ways of knowing and into different kinds of knowledge.

For International A level students, cognitive skills, such as critical thinking, problem solving, analysis, reasoning and argumentation are embedded into both Pearson Edexcel International GCSEs and Pearson Edexcel International A levels,<sup>8</sup> and signposted in schemes of work and textbooks so students and teachers can easily identify and reflect upon the skills they are developing as part of their subject-specific learning.

In addition, international schools offering Pearson Edexcel International A levels widely ensure teachers use metacognition across the curriculum. In this way, many of the benefits of TOK are implemented in International GCSE and International A level classrooms as part of subject-based learning.

This comparison of compulsory components with the IB Diploma, and optional components that can be added alongside International A levels reveals that like IB Diploma students, Pearson Edexcel International A level students have very similar opportunities to develop general as well as specialist knowledge, to hone independent research skills and complete service learning

experiences alongside their academically rigorous subject learning.

Speaking to this point in an article for International School Parent,<sup>9</sup> Sarah Frei of Brillantmont International School in Lausanne, says:

*"We strongly believe that A levels give students flexibility and freedom in their learning choices. Rather than having a fixed programme imposed upon them, students choose three or four A level subjects, about which they are passionate. This freedom of choice allows them to develop depth of knowledge in their chosen subject, building critical thinking and academic skills... Similarly, service learning and extra-curricular activities are chosen by the students, rather than being imposed upon them, as is the case with other programmes. Students effectively take ownership for their learning. Furthermore, the fact that A levels are recognised and held in high regard by universities worldwide is of utmost importance, since our students continue their higher education across the globe."*

## How do they compare on international mindedness?

The IB DP was established in 1968 to provide students with a balanced education, facilitate geographic and cultural mobility and to promote international understanding.<sup>10</sup> As an internationally focused curriculum, the IB Diploma strives to develop global citizens by ensuring all DP graduates have studied two languages.

IB schools in the UK often put forward the argument that only an IB curriculum will develop internationally minded students, but it is important to consider they are most often not comparing their curriculum to International A levels. Pearson Edexcel International A levels and International GCSEs are modern qualifications for globally minded students. As such, they also provide students with a broad and internationally balanced education with academic content and local contexts designed specifically for international learners.

Although the IB Diploma requires all students to study two languages, most International A level students will also continue two languages up to undergraduate level – either as an international A level subject, through their language of tuition, their home language or through additional language classes, which can sit alongside their Pearson Edexcel International A level curriculum as part of an enriched programme of learning.

## The verdict? Think again!

Both IB Diploma and International A level students have opportunities to develop their general as well as specialist knowledge, hone independent research skills, study additional language/s and complete service learning experiences alongside their subject learning.

## A more balanced headline would be:

*“Both the IB DP and International A levels encourage students learn to think critically, develop independent enquiry skills, become active members of their communities and foster an international mindset. The IB DP does this through compulsory components whereas International A level students have the flexibility to design their own, bespoke programme of study to sit alongside their Pearson Edexcel International A levels.”*

## References

- <sup>1</sup> IB Diploma students are required to choose one subject from each of six academic areas - Studies in language and literature, Language acquisition, Individuals and societies, Sciences, Maths and the Arts. They can choose a second subject from each academic area except the arts. [IB Diploma Programme, IB Organisation.](#)
- <sup>2</sup> In Greece for example, students can study for International A levels whilst also completing Greek Lykeion without having to sit Panhellenic National Level examinations. This means they can secure both the Apolitirio and admission to universities in Greece, the UK and worldwide. [A levels or IB?](#) Foundation College Greece.
- <sup>3</sup> [Creativity, activity, service \(CAS\)](#), IB Organisation.
- <sup>4</sup> [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.
- <sup>5</sup> [The Extended Essay](#), IB Organisation.
- <sup>6</sup> Designed to develop students' critical, reflective, problem-solving and independent learning skills, the 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.](#)
- <sup>7</sup> [What is TOK?](#) IB Organisation.

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- <sup>8</sup> [Transferable skills information pack](#), Pearson Edexcel.
- <sup>9</sup> [A levels – could they be a better choice than the IB?](#) International School Parent.
- <sup>10</sup> [Key facts about the DP](#), IBO.

## Further reading

### Read more in our series of myth busting factsheets:

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

*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?*

