



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

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?*).

Schools offering the IB Diploma often state that their students cope well with the transition to university as they have developed independent research skills through the Extended Essay component, and critical thinking skills through the Theory of Knowledge (TOK) component of the IB DP, so they have both the subject knowledge and skills they need to thrive in higher education.

This is of course true. However, statements that suggest IB students are better prepared for university than International A level students are misleading because International A levels are only one facet of the typical British curriculum student's qualifications, skillset and experience by the time they apply to university.

### Where do headlines like this come from?

An IB Research report from 2018<sup>1</sup> references a study that 'surveyed the perceptions of UK university admissions officers of A level and DP students' preparation for university'. The 2017 study<sup>2</sup> referred to in this report is by ACS International Schools who run three IB and US curriculum schools in Greater London and one in Qatar. The study is no longer available online, however the IB report repeats the study's conclusion that 'overall, the DP was considered the best educational qualification for providing students with the necessary skills to succeed at university' and, according to ACS, 'university admissions officers believed the DP was particularly helpful in "nurturing an open mind".'

A 2022 article referencing this study, written by International Community School London<sup>3</sup> – an IB school in Central London – says that 'the (IB) Diploma offers a balanced and broad education so students gain more than traditional academic knowledge. The curriculum develops and sharpens investigative, research, and critical-thinking skills that are useful in university and the modern workforce.'

It suggests that around 80 UK university admissions officers were surveyed as part of the ACS research but as the original study is no longer accessible, it is unclear whether it was comparing the IB Diploma with UK (GCE) A levels or International A levels.

It is useful to compare the two international curricula – the IB Diploma and International A levels – to better understand how each provides opportunities for students to develop the skills that will help them thrive in higher education and beyond.

## How do the two international curricula compare on critical thinking skills?

The TOK component with 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>4</sup> It is central to the education philosophy of the IB Diploma and whilst there isn't a direct equivalent component 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 (IAL®),<sup>5</sup> so students develop these skills from year 10 onwards.

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, where IB students learn to think critically, are delivered in International GCSE and International A level classrooms as part of subject-based learning.

## How do they compare on independent research skills?

The compulsory Extended Essay component of the IB Diploma is an independent, self-directed piece of research, finishing with a 4,000-word essay.<sup>6</sup> Students investigate a topic which relates to one of their six DP subjects, or they choose a world studies topic. Through this work, they develop skills in formulating a research question, conducting independent research, communicating ideas and formulating an argument – all widely valued skills for undergraduates.

In comparison, although an extended essay component is not mandatory within all International A level programmes, Pearson Edexcel International A level students – often through additional qualifications offered by their school – can add a very similar component, the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ)<sup>7</sup>, into their curriculum. The Level 3 EPQ is an independent research project carried out on a subject of the student's choice and submitted typically as a 5,000-word dissertation along with a presentation about their research. The EPQ is equivalent to half an International A level and widely recognised and respected by universities. Like the IB DP Extended Essay, it gives students the opportunity to develop critical, reflective, problem-solving and independent learning skills – again, all widely valued skills for undergraduates.

See more on how both curricula provide skills development opportunities in our myth-buster factsheet *Is the IB the only curriculum where students foster an international mindset?*

## The verdict? Think again!

On the face of it, it is easy to see how university admissions officers may view the IB DP as a more comprehensive programme to International A levels, encompassing, as it does, both subject specific knowledge and skills development. But this is by no means the full picture.

Firstly, because critical thinking isn't an explicit, graded component within International A level programmes in the same way it is with IB DP TOK, it is difficult for university admissions officers to make a balanced comparison of students' skillsets in this area across the two curricula.

And secondly, because the EPQ is an additional qualification and isn't an explicit, graded component within International A level programmes in the same way the Extended Essay is within the IB DP, it is not evaluated as a 'standard' part of an International A level students' learning profile either. However, university admissions teams recognise the value of this additional qualification: it carries UCAS points, so is counted alongside A level grades, for entry onto undergraduate programmes in the UK and for many courses, an International A level student with a grade A in EPQ will attract a course offer one grade lower than the normal entry requirement, compared to a student without an EPQ.

A more complete comparison – of compulsory components with the IB Diploma, and optional components that can be added alongside International A levels – therefore reveals that, like IB Diploma students, Pearson Edexcel International A level students have similar opportunities to develop critical thinking and independent research skills alongside their academically rigorous subject learning.

## A more balanced headline would be:

*"IB Diploma and International A level students are similarly well prepared for the transition to university as both programmes provide them with the skills they need to thrive in higher education. IB students develop critical thinking and independent research skills alongside subject knowledge as part of their DP programme and International A level students develop the same skills alongside subject knowledge through their differently structured academic programmes."*

## References

- <sup>1</sup> [Key findings from research on the impact of IB programmes in the Africa, Europe, Middle East \(AEM\) region](#), IB Research 2018.
- <sup>2</sup> ACS International Schools 2017 study 'Thriving at University: University Admissions Officers Report 2017 ([unretrievable online](#) August 2023).
- <sup>3</sup> [Why universities prefer the IB Diploma over A levels – ICS London](#), International Community School London, November 2022, UK Independent Schools Directory.
- <sup>4</sup> [What is TOK?](#), IB Organisation.
- <sup>5</sup> [Transferable skills information pack](#), Pearson Edexcel.
- <sup>6</sup> [The Extended Essay](#), IB Organisation.
- <sup>7</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](#).

## Further reading

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

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

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

*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?*

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