



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

The basis for this claim is that because IB Diploma students study six subjects and International A level students typically study three subjects, this means more subject disciplines are open to IB students at undergraduate level. This is not the case.

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

Although IB DP students study six subjects from six subject groups¹ – Studies in language and literature, Language acquisition, Individuals and societies, Science, Mathematics and the Arts – they will only take three, or occasionally four, subjects at higher level and will take the other three, or two, at standard level. Standard level subjects comprise 150 teaching hours and higher level subjects comprise 240 teaching hours.

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 subjects at International A level, from a choice of over 20 subjects including English Language/ Literature, Languages, Sciences, Maths, Humanities and Arts subjects. Each Pearson Edexcel International A level (IAL[®]) comprises a total of 360 teaching hours.²

How do they compare on subject choice?

Some countries will specify the subjects IB students must take as part of their Diploma programme, for example, in Switzerland, all students must take either Maths or a Science at higher level. This supports the IB's philosophy that students must study a variety of subjects to broaden their general as well as specialist knowledge but reduces IB DP students' flexibility over subject choice.

In comparison, the subject choice for International A level students is far wider, allowing students to decide whether they want to develop deep specialist knowledge by choosing to study Pearson Edexcel International A levels within a single discipline, or remain as generalists, by choosing to study a broader choice of International A level subjects spanning multiple disciplines.

How are IB DP and International A level subject choices valued by universities?

Typically, IB students need the full IB Diploma for entrance to university, which means passing all subjects as well as the compulsory TOK, CAS and extended essay components.³ In practice, this means that the subjects studied as part of the IB Diploma are only of value to universities when the student has the full IB DP qualification.

In addition, university courses that require specific subjects at A level or equivalent will typically require IB students to take these same subjects at higher level as part of their Diploma programme, so like their International A level counterparts, IB DP students will typically only have three subjects to count towards degree-level subject-specific entry requirements.

Unlike the IB DP subjects, each Pearson Edexcel International A level subject holds individual value with universities. This, together with the additional flexibility International A level students have over subject choice and the depth of study involved in each A level subject, provides more opportunities for International A level students to demonstrate their focus on and achievements in subjects related to their chosen degree courses.

For students who know what they want to specialise in at undergraduate level, this can be a significant benefit.

For example, a student wishing to study medicine at university could choose Pearson Edexcel International A levels in Biology, Chemistry and Physics and supplement this with a Pearson Edexcel Extended Project Qualification⁴ in an area related to medical research – a combination that would not be possible within the IB DP programme.

An IB DP student with similar aspirations could choose Biology, Chemistry and Mathematics, plus literature, a language and a science subject, but only three of these subjects would be taken at higher level and therefore considered for university entrance.

For students who have not decided on a degree specialism, flexible academic study options are possible with both curricula. For example, an IB student may choose a combination of French, English, Biology, Maths, Psychology and Art, and study three of these to higher level, which would be accepted as part of their wider IB Diploma qualification for entry on to a number of different undergraduate courses.

A Pearson Edexcel International A level student may also choose a similarly broad combination. For example, as a native French speaker they may study in English and choose to study English Language, Biology and Maths, supplementing these with an Extended Project Qualification in an area related to psychology or art.

What do international school leaders say?

In an article for International School Parent⁵, Sandra Steiger, formerly of the International School of Geneva says:

“Both qualifications are widely respected routes into university. However, the A Level qualification has its fans, mainly because they allow students to continue studying only the subjects where their most passionate interests and talents lie. This can make the final two years of school a lot more motivating for some students and even give students a

tactical advantage allowing them to score better in their final exams by dropping their weaker subjects.”

And in the same article, 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. Students can focus on the subjects they love and are not held back by having to study subjects they do not enjoy. 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.”

The verdict? Think again!

It's a simple misconception that the IB DP gives students more choice over degree subjects. In fact, where university courses require specific subjects at A level or equivalent, they will typically require IB students to have taken these subjects at higher level as part of their Diploma programme and will not consider the three standard level subjects.

For students who have decided on a degree specialism, the additional flexibility International A levels offer in terms of subject choice and the depth of study involved in each subject can be a significant benefit. And students who have not decided on a degree specialism enjoy flexible academic study options with both curricula, with both the IB Diploma and International A levels allowing students to choose broad combinations of subjects.

A more balanced headline would be:

“Both the IB DP and International A levels offer students choice over degree subject. International A levels can offer greater flexibility of choice and depth of study for students who have a specific degree specialism in mind, but flexible academic study options are possible with both curricula and both the IB Diploma and International A levels allow students to choose broad combinations of subjects if they wish.”

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 [Pearson Edexcel International A levels \(IAL[®]\)](#), Pearson.
- ³ Universities in Europe 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.
- ⁴ 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. 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. Read more about [the Project Qualification from Pearson](#).
- ⁵ [A levels – could they be a better choice than the IB?](#) International School Parent.

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?

Are IB students better prepared for the transition to university 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.

