



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

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, some IB schools claim IB research shows that IB DP students are three times more likely to enrol in a top UK university.¹

Is this compelling statistic as straightforward as it sounds? Not quite.

Where do headlines like this come from?

In 2016 and 2021, IB researchers used HESA data² to examine the higher education outcomes of IB Diploma Programme students compared to their A level peers. These studies included data from 2007–08 to 2018–19.

The data itself doesn't deliver the headline that IB DP students are 21% more likely to enrol in a top 20 UK university, rather, it is arrived at by using a statistical technique called propensity score matching, in which the IB researchers created equivalent samples of DP and A level students, comparable on five demographic characteristics (sex, socio-economic classification, ethnicity, state school marker and low participation marker) and prior academic achievement. The equivalent

sample sizes are not shared in the research, so it is unclear how representative they are of the entire IB DP and A level student body in the period analysed. Similarly, it is not clear whether the samples included students in international schools outside the UK studying either the IB DP or International or UK A levels.

The research also used odds ratios to indicate the likelihood of each higher education outcome for the two groups of students. Odds ratio is an indicator of how large the likelihood of an outcome is for one group of students compared to the other, rather than empirical evidence backed up by hard data.

The verdict? Think again!

Although the IB researchers drew sound conclusions from the data they analysed, the headline that IB DP students are 21% more likely to enrol in a top 20 UK university is not based on actual student performance in international schools and includes odds-based calculations.

The research also uses the same methodology to analyse the likelihood of both groups of students achieving a first-class honours degree: in 2017, IB DP students were deemed 9% more likely to do so but by 2021, this had dropped to 7%.

So this data could equally suggest that, once at one of the top 20 UK universities, both A level and IB DP students show far more similar likelihoods of achieving top degree classifications.

A more balanced headline would be:

"IB DP students are statistically more likely than similar A level students to enrol in a top 20 UK higher education institution but this is not based on actual student data... however once they're there, there's little difference in the likelihood of both groups of students achieving first class degrees."

References

- ¹ [Why universities prefer the IB Diploma over A levels - ICS London](#), International Community School London, November 2022, UK Independent Schools Directory.
- ² [IB Diploma Programme long-term trends in DP student outcomes](#) at UK higher education drawing data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (2016) and Jisc (Duxbury et al., 2021).

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?

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 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?

