



MYTH BUSTERS

THE IB VS
INTERNATIONAL
A LEVELS

Are IB students more likely to be admitted to the US's most prestigious universities?

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, it has been suggested that IB students are 21% more likely to be admitted to the most prestigious universities in the US. Whilst this is an eye-catching statement, the research supporting the claim is difficult to pinpoint.¹

It is also unclear who IB students are being compared to when they are described as 'more likely' to be admitted to the US's most prestigious universities: a 2019 IB research study finds that US IB DP graduates are more likely to enrol in college immediately after graduating from high school compared to 'the average American high school student' (82% versus 66%)² but there is no such comparison between IB and International A level students.

In the absence of statistics to back this claim up, understanding more about the US universities admissions process can help put this statement into context.

How do US university admissions work?

All US universities practise holistic admissions, and each university sets its own criteria. Importantly, almost all US universities stress that a student's grades are only one factor in considering their suitability for admission.

For US students, grade requirements for US higher education admissions typically include the High School Diploma GPA (9-12) combined with a standardised test grade such as ACT or SAT. The overall standard of these tests is broadly equivalent to International GCSE level.³

For International GCSE and International A level students, the Fulbright Commission recommends at least five GCSEs at grade C or above in academic subjects, and two or three A levels. However, unlike the UK system, acceptance at a US university is not conditional on a student's final A level results and universities will generally ask for GCSE and AS level results, along with an indication of academic progress in the final (A2) year.⁴

In addition, some students, including US, IB and International A level students take accelerated programs to further support their US college applications – these are programs that meet the requirements of the State High School Diploma and provide college credit.

In order of size, the most common of these in the US market are the Advanced Placement (AP), the IB Diploma and the AICE Diploma⁵ in combination with International A levels.

Generally, the IB Diploma and AICE/International A levels combination receive similar college credit weightings and both Cambridge and Pearson Edexcel offer International A level programmes so there is no evidence to suggest that one A level curricula would be preferred over another by US universities.

AP credit weightings however are typically more generous, especially given the volume of the awards among applicants to US universities.

Family wealth as a factor in US university admissions

Although the academic route to US university admissions varies in the same way it does with universities worldwide, no analysis of US university admissions would be complete without considering family wealth. Because of the holistic nature of US universities admissions, family wealth is a big factor, as reported by a 2019 Inside Higher Ed article *Wealth and admissions*. The ACT found that applicants from families with incomes of at least \$80,000 outperform others in test scores and concluded that 'the data are consistent: wealthier students, on average, earn higher scores.'⁶

Typically, IB schools in the US are either private or situated in wealthier neighbourhoods which could suggest that IB students may be successful at securing admissions to the most prestigious universities not solely because of the curriculum they have followed, but also, in a large part, due to their socio-economic background and family wealth.

The verdict? Think again!

In short, any narrative about one qualification giving students greater chances of entering a top university in the US must be balanced with a consideration about wealth because sampling a small demographic of wealthy students who are also taking an accelerated program will inevitably suggest a greater access to top higher education institutions.

A more balanced headline would be:

"The IB Diploma and AICE + International A levels combination are recognised accelerated programs in the US and as such, receive similar college credit weightings. However, US universities practise holistic admissions

and family wealth is a big factor alongside grades. As IB schools are typically private or in wealthier neighbourhoods in the US and as applicants from families with higher incomes are advantaged, it is perhaps not surprising that IB students are successful in being admitted into the United States' most prestigious universities."

References

- ¹ International Community School London, an IB school in central London, includes the statistic in their [article](#) published on The UK Independent Schools Directory website but the source is not referenced. A similar, lower statistic is included in an October 2018 [report](#) 'IB student acceptance rates at the top 25 US universities' published by university admissions consultancy Crimson, but again, the source research is not referenced.
- ² [Postsecondary Outcomes of IB Diploma Programme Graduates in the US](#), December 2019
- ³ According to the [Good Schools Guide](#), many US universities regard (International or UK) GCSEs as 'the rough equivalent to the US 11th grade plus a little more.'
- ⁴ [Which curriculum will get you into university \(UK or US\)?](#), The Good Schools Guide
- ⁵ Cambridge Advanced International Certificate Diploma.
- ⁶ [Wealth and admissions](#), Inside Higher Ed, March 2019.

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

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?