



Are British qualifications only useful if you want to study at British 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, one claim often repeated is that British qualifications are only useful if you want to study at a British university.

This is not the case.

British qualifications don't have to mean British universities

Around the world, the British system is the most popular curriculum in the world, offered at 30% of international schools globally.

Millions of international students in 160 countries worldwide choose to study British qualifications for their enduring and deserved reputation for excellence and because they offer a flexible and globally recognised learning pathway based on the highly respected English National Curriculum. UK and International A levels are the most popular qualifications, offered by 34%

of international schools with a 16-18 provision. This compares to 26% of international schools who offer the IB.¹

And far from being a route to UK universities only, International A levels open doors to more of the world's universities than the IB: over 750 universities worldwide accept Pearson Edexcel International A levels (IAL[®]), compared to just over 500 who recognise the IB.²

Do international students still want to study at British universities?

The short answer is yes! According to the latest HESA data,³ over 86,400 students domiciled in the European Union were studying undergraduate courses at UK universities in the 2021/22 academic year, with an even greater number studying in the UK at post graduate level. And the most recent UCAS data release for the 2022 entry cycle shows a 5% increase in the total number of international students accepting a place on a UK university undergraduate course.

This increase is however driven more by non-EU than EU students. This is because the UK's exit from the European Union post-Brexit has undoubtedly impacted the UK HE sector since 2016 referendum and although international students in Europe are still applying to and studying at UK universities, they are doing so at lower rates than before Brexit.

As the British Council explains: 'The overall acceptance rate for international students has stayed roughly the same as last year, with 49% of international applicants eventually accepting a place at a UK HEI. But this acceptance rate is noticeably lower than previous trends, mostly driven by a sharp drop in the acceptance rate for EU students since the post-Brexit changes to student finance took effect.'⁴

Year-on-year, the picture is gradually improving though: in 2022, there was a 28% fall in the number of EU students applying to UK universities, this fall was less steep than in 2021 when the year-on-year decline was 50%.

And in a January 2023 survey by COBIS,⁵ 52% of international schools reported that the percentage of leavers from their school choosing a university in the UK stayed the same for the 2022/23 academic year compared to the previous year and 19% indicated that the percentage of leavers choosing a university in the UK had increased.

The verdict? Think again!

So, although international students do still want to study at British universities, the countries those students are domiciled in are changing; fewer EU students are choosing to study in the UK for now but they are using their International A levels to gain entrance onto undergraduate courses at universities worldwide, where recognition for their qualifications remain strong and outstrips that of the IB.

A more balanced headline would be:

"British qualifications are valuable wherever you want to study in the world. International A levels are excellent preparation for entry to UK universities, which remain a popular destination for international students, and Pearson Edexcel International A levels (IAL[®]) are more widely recognised than the IB Diploma Programme for entry to universities all around the world."

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References

- ¹ ISC Research data, 2022.
- ² [Find countries and universities that recognize the IB](#), IB Organisation, August 2023.
- ³ HE student enrolments by domicile and region of HE provider for academic years 2014/15 to 2021/22, [HESA](#)
- ⁴ [UCAS end-of-cycle data shows strong growth from most non-EU countries in 2022...](#), British Council, December 2022.
- ⁵ [COBIS Annual Research Survey Report 2022](#), COBIS.

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 IB students more likely to be admitted into the United States' most prestigious universities?

Are you only a real international school if you offer an IB curriculum?

