



MYTH BUSTERS

THE IB VS
INTERNATIONAL
A LEVELS

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

The argument behind this claim is that only IB schools offer a truly international curriculum, that other curricula do not provide students with a similar international outlook or prepare them for global opportunities and that only IB schools have control over their curriculum. This is not the case.

Where do headlines like this come from?

The IB Diploma Programme was established in 1968 to provide students with a balanced education, facilitate geographic and cultural mobility and to promote international understanding.¹ IB schools therefore often put forward the argument that only an IB curriculum will develop internationally minded students, but it is important to consider they are most often not comparing their curriculum to International A levels.

Pearson Edexcel International A levels (IAL[®]) and International GCSEs are modern qualifications for globally minded students. As such, they also provide students with a broad and internationally balanced education with academic content and local contexts designed specifically for international learners.

In fact, the British system – UK and international GCSEs and A levels – is the most popular curriculum in the world, offered at 34% of international schools globally, compared to 26% of schools offering an IB-only pathway.²

How do the two international curricula compare on language learning?

IB schools also sometimes claim that, as an internationally focused curriculum, only the IB strives to develop global citizens by requiring all IB Diploma students to study two languages. In reality, most International A level students will also continue two languages up to undergraduate level – either as an International A level subject, through their language of tuition, their home language or through additional language classes, which can sit alongside their International A level curriculum as part of an enriched programme of learning.

Do IB students have more flexibility over their learning?

Another claim is that IB schools have greater flexibility over their curriculum than international schools offering International GCSEs and International A levels.

In reality, although the two international curricula differ in structure, many international schools choosing an International GCSE and International A level curriculum do so because it means their International A level students retain more flexibility over what they study, when they are examined and the additional components they take to enrich their curriculum.

In contrast, IB Diploma students in IB schools have far less flexibility over what they study and when they are examined as all components are compulsory and contribute to overall end assessments and points awarded.

For more on this, see our myth buster factsheet *Is the IB DP programme more academically rigorous than A levels?*

Do IB schools have more control over their curriculum?

The IB is a complete curriculum system, with little room for the extra-curricular activities or enrichment programmes that can serve to differentiate one international school from another. Many international schools offering International A levels are able to create competitive advantage for their school by offering, for example, internship or mentoring programmes for their older students and after-school clubs in a variety of disciplines for younger learners.

IB schools have far less flexibility to inject similar freedom into their programmes of learning, which can sometimes be to the detriment of the uniqueness the school is able to demonstrate to prospective families.

The verdict? Think again!

Both IB schools and those offering international A levels are 'real' international schools and in fact, more international schools follow a British curriculum than an IB curriculum. Both curricula provide students with an international education, instil strong international mindsets and prepare them for global opportunities. By virtue of the structure and rules of the IB, international schools offering an IB curriculum have less flexibility over how they do this but both curricula offer highly respected international education pathways and international students with both qualifications are highly valued by universities worldwide.

A more balanced headline would be:

"International schools can offer various curricula to their students. The British system is the most widely offered international school curriculum in the world, but IB and US curricula are also popular pathways. Both the British international and IB curricula equip students with a strong international mindset and qualifications that are recognised for progression to universities worldwide."

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References

- ¹ [Key facts about the DP](#), IB Organisation.
- ² 160 countries worldwide offer their learners a British international curriculum pathway and UK and International A levels are the most popular qualifications, offered by 34% of international schools with KS5 provision (compared to 26% offering IB), ISC Research data, 2023.

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 British qualifications only useful if you want to study at a British university?

