

How to choose between A-levels and IB

To choose between A-levels and International Baccalaureate, ask whether you are a specialist or an all-rounder.

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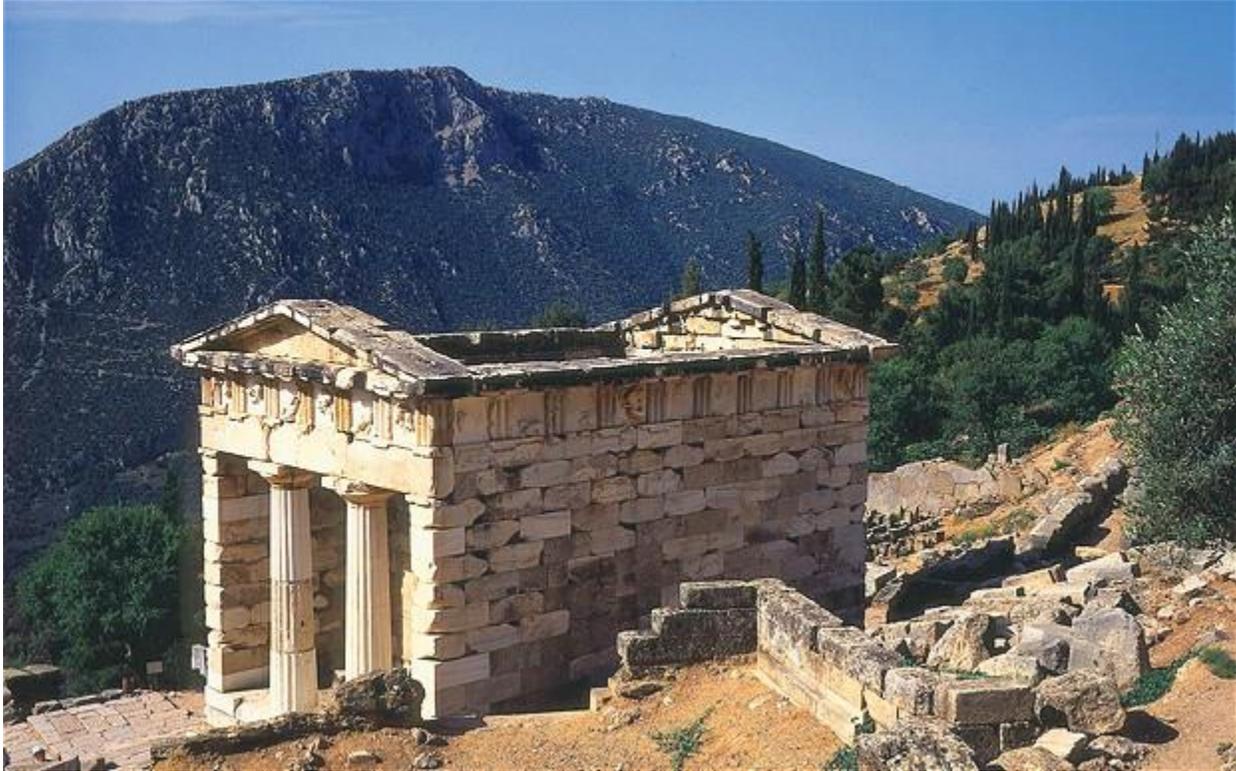
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Pillars of wisdom: the Treasury of the Athenians at Delphi, where offerings to the oracle were put on display Photo: The Art Archive/Alamy

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This is the time of year when Year 11 students across the country are enrolling at sixth-form open mornings to consider their future options. One factor they increasingly need to consider is whether to study A-levels or the International Baccalaureate.

With 150 British schools and colleges now registered to offer the IB – still a very small proportion of the schools in England – there is a very real alternative to the traditional A-level route to university entrance.

So what are the differences? First up, the International Baccalaureate. The IB is divided into six groups: language, second language, individuals and societies, mathematics and computer science, experimental sciences and the arts. Three of these groups are taught at a “higher” level, and more teaching hours are allocated to them. In addition, pupils complete an extended essay,

follow a Theory of Knowledge course (TOK) and participate in the CAS (Creativity, Action, Service) programme, which encompasses sport, arts and community work.

Such a spread of subjects suits all-round pupils who don't wish to drop from around 10 GCSEs to three or four AS subjects; the emphasis on personal research undoubtedly prepares pupils effectively for the academic and organisational rigours of university life. However, all six subject groups must be completed, meaning that one weaker subject can drag down an entire IB score.

Many regard this as the fundamental weakness of the IB. A poor showing in an area of the curriculum that a student is not actually very interested in could cost him or her their university place.

It is crucially important that students realise this. And if they want evidence to support it, they need only look at the success rate of IB and A-level students in securing places at their first or second-choice universities. For A-level applicants, there is an 81 per cent success rate, but for IB it is only 69 per cent.

Another factor to bear in mind is that the IB is much more time consuming. Some students relish this pressure but others complain that it eats into time they would rather devote to drama, music or sport. Perversely, an exam system designed to create a broader education can, for some students, have the opposite effect.

A-levels, of course, are an established commodity. The vast majority of British sixth-formers sit them (compared to only 0.49 per cent who follow the IB) and universities and employers certainly understand them more readily. Students generally opt to study four subjects at AS level from around 80 available subjects, dropping down in most cases to three A2 level subjects in the Upper Sixth. There is more breadth than there used to be – the fourth subject at AS was introduced for this very reason – and there is also now more stretch and challenge, reflected in the introduction of the A* at A-level – which is actually harder to achieve than the top mark of seven in the IB. It definitely suits those who know what they want to do and is particularly advantageous for scientists: under the A-level, students can study physics, chemistry and biology, whereas the IB restricts students to two sciences.

Those students who opt for A-levels and wish to broaden their horizons further can also do an extended project, the EPQ (Extended Project Qualification) on a topic of their choice. In other words, today's A-level programme is very different from that of 20 years ago. It has responded to the critics and to the challenges posed by the rival IB qualification, and it now offers students stretch, challenge and breadth.

So which one is for you? If Ucas statistics are anything to go by, the vast majority of schools and students are sticking with the A-level. It is better than it used to be and no less an institution than Cambridge University recently rode to the defence of AS exams. But there is no doubt also that the

IB can be brilliant for a certain type of student: the genuine all-rounder who also has the appetite for work that the broad IB curriculum demands.

My advice to Year 11 students is the same as the motto carved into the wall of the oracle's temple at Delphi: know thyself. Think very deeply about what would best suit you as an individual. And remember, the best sixth formers are not outstanding because they follow the A-level or the IB, they are outstanding because they have teachers who inspire them intellectually. That is what you must look for as you head from one open day to another.