

IB passes the test for popularity

Six subjects and a stable syllabus – no wonder many schools are finding the International Baccalaureate appealing, says Nick Morrison

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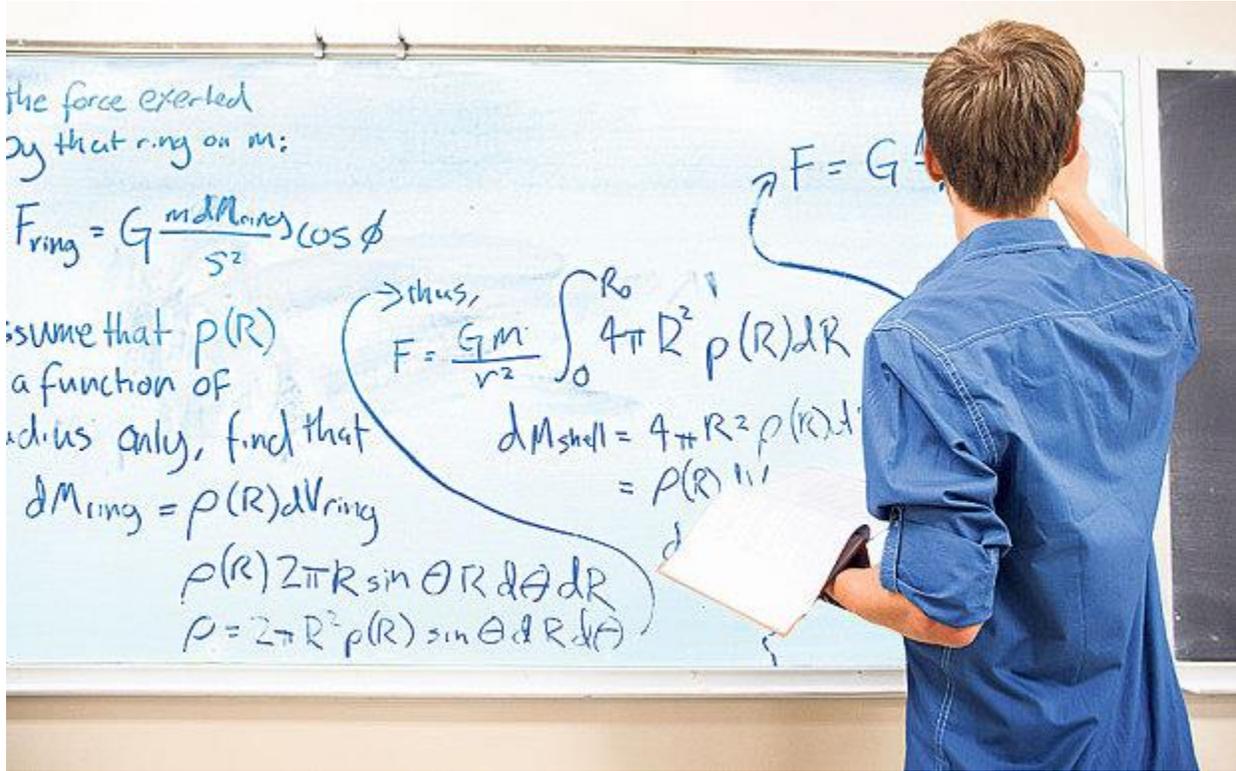
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Do the maths: the IB offers a greater breadth of subjects than A-levels



By Nick Morrison

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Exam reforms seem to come along with alarming frequency, but throughout decades of upheaval one qualification has remained the same. While A-level students will be grappling with a dual system of old and new courses over the next few years, their peers taking the International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma can remain confident that theirs will stay constant.

“I can’t tell you how relieved we are at not having to adapt to these changes,” says Pauline Bullen, deputy head at Tonbridge Grammar School in Kent. “There is a lot of stability in the diploma and it has not been subject to the grade inflation that we have seen happening with A-levels.”

The average A-level score has been climbing over the past three decades, with the number of students getting the top grade increasing apart from a brief reversal in 2012 and 2013. But over the same period the average IB diploma score has remained broadly the same.

Two years ago, Tonbridge Grammar became exclusively an IB school. "We felt that the diploma had so many additional advantages," says Bullen, who is chairman of the IB Schools and Colleges Association (IBSCA).

"It has a far broader subject space and we felt very strongly that for 16-year-olds to be narrowing to three subjects was not going to equip them for the kinds of flexible career and life pathways they're going to be having."

While students take three or four subjects at A-level, on the IB they take six, three at standard level and three at higher. These must include maths, English, a foreign language, a science and a humanities subject.

This was another of the reasons behind Tonbridge Grammar's decision to focus on the IB. "We felt that any young person not doing maths after 16 was at a particular disadvantage," says Bullen.

Differences between the A-level and IB will be enhanced by the A-level reforms, says David Shaw, IB coordinator at Bilborough Sixth Form in Nottingham. For students enrolling on the new A-levels from September, their AS result will no longer contribute towards their final grade. Students will be less likely to take AS levels if they do not count, so narrowing their subject choices even more.

"There is going to be a much starker contrast between the A-level and IB," says Shaw. "We think it will make the IB more appealing for students who think three subjects are not enough." Bilborough offers both pathways and Shaw says the IB is ideal for students who want to retain some breadth in their studies and for those who have not yet made up their mind what to study at university.

IB subjects also have some advantages over their A-level counterparts, he says. While the new English A-level will be assessed through a written exam, for example, the IB English course involves a presentation and an interview with the teacher.

"There is a lot of emphasis on speaking and listening skills, which we know employers and students want," Shaw says.

If students are not taking AS-levels, they will no longer get a grade at the end of their first year of sixth form. This puts A-level students back on level terms with their IB counterparts, says Guy Essex, programme team leader for IB at Truro and Penwith College in Cornwall.

"One of the things universities sometimes say about the IB is that halfway through the course they don't have an externally awarded grade, which is what AS provided," he says. "Now nobody is going to have that."

While A-level students can expect a number of free periods, the different elements of the IB mean those taking it can expect a full timetable. As well as their six subjects, IB students also complete a 4,000-word extended essay, take a course in theory of knowledge, and complete a creativity, action, service (CAS) programme, involving artistic, sporting and voluntary endeavours. “It is attractive for people who enjoy the busyness of the course,” says Essex. “They’re never short of anything to put on their university applications.”

But more teaching time means the IB diploma is more expensive for schools. With budgets getting tighter, state schools in particular are finding it difficult to deliver the IB, according to Sandra Morton, IBSCA chief executive.

“Where schools have had to abandon the diploma it is not because they don’t value the programme, it is because they don’t have the funding,” she says.

A minimum of four staff at schools wanting to switch to the diploma – including the head teacher – are required to undergo training in the IB, adding to the cost.

“Schools wanting to deliver the diploma are doing so on the understanding that it is more costly,” says Morton. IBSCA is lobbying the Government to increase the funding provided to schools that offer the IB, she adds. But some private schools, such as Marlborough College, have joined state schools in dropping the IB.

One of the aims of the A-level reforms is to make them harder, but lack of rigour is not an accusation that can be levelled at the IB, says Stephen Elphick, head of Bexley Grammar in south-east London.

Bexley Grammar offers both A-levels and IB, but from 2017 will switch to all-IB. “What we’re getting with A-levels is a mimicking of the stretch of the IB but if that’s the case why not have the original?” he says.

The IB may be a lagoon of calm compared with the choppy seas of A-levels, but he says there is plenty more to recommend it, including the fact that the CAS programme is an integral part of the diploma.

“So many students are doing these things but to get credit for it and a recognition that it is part of learning is fantastic,” he says. “This way you are saying ‘We value the fact that you’re going swimming’ or whatever it happens to be, and it fits what good students are doing as a matter of course.”

The past few years have also seen a greater awareness of the strengths of the IB among university admission tutors, says Peter Gray, IB coordinator at Malvern College in Worcestershire. “We have seen a big change and it is a lot more familiar to universities now,” he says. “They’re well up on what it involves and we find the offers our students get are very reasonable.”

Admissions tutors look favourably on IB students after seeing how they handle the step up to higher education, says Peter Fidczuk, UK development and recognition officer for the International

Baccalaureate Organisation. "When it comes to the things universities look for, a range of broad and balanced skills, IB students are well equipped," he says.

Malvern also offers A-levels, with about half of its sixth-formers on each programme, and there may be some students more suited to A-levels, says head Antony Clark.

"They tend to fall into two categories: those who are very set on a particular course, and those who perceive themselves to be absolutely hopeless at maths or whatever," he says. "But the IB keeps your options open and prepares you very well for handling the step up for university. It gives you a roundedness, which you don't get with A-level."