

International Baccalaureate: is it any good?

The International Baccalaureate is increasing in popularity. But does it carry sufficient clout with universities? Jon Cartwright reports.

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International baccalaureate: while it is still a minority choice, students say that it teaches them to think differently. Photo: Alamy

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The International Baccalaureate goes down well with sixth formers at **Finham Park School** in Coventry, who have opted to take its diploma programme. But ask them whether they think their friends studying for regular A-levels are jealous, and they laugh. Harriet Carrington, 18, explains, “I think you have to take the IB to appreciate what it actually gives you.”

If Harriet and her friends are in on some sort of prized secret, then it is becoming a less exclusive one. Little by little, students are turning away from A-levels and taking up IB diplomas instead, to the extent that last year IBs made up about 1.2 per cent of pending qualifications for university applications – up from 0.8 per cent in 2008, according to Ucas figures.

The trend reflects a growing feeling among educators that the IB is not just for the sons and daughters of globe-trotting diplomats, as it was originally intended, but for any student who wants a

broader education. For 15- and 16-year-olds mulling over sixth-form courses, however, the question is whether such a broad education comes at any cost.

The IB was introduced in the late Sixties to cater for the growing numbers of internationally mobile students who wanted an education that was not tied to any national government's agenda. More than that, it sought to bring together Cold War children from the West and the East, and thereby promote future peace.

Even today, the International Baccalaureate Organization is driven by a somewhat grand mission statement, which reads: "The International Baccalaureate aims to develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect."

Of the four study programmes now offered by the IBO, by far the most popular in the UK is the IB diploma. It is not just an alternative to A-levels but an entirely different two-year programme of learning.

During the course, students pick one subject from each of six subject groups – languages, sciences, the arts, and so on – and study three of these to a higher level. In addition, they take a course in "the theory of knowledge" (TOK), write an extended essay and participate in "creativity, action, service" – a nonexamined module that focuses on — yes — creativity, sport and community service.

Grading at the end comes down to a points score: marks out of seven for each subject, and three possible additional points for the combined TOK and essay, for a maximum of 45 points.



An International Baccalaureate paper

The system has its share of critics. The most widely voiced concerns are that the IB promotes breadth over depth, and that it fails to instil in young people any of the national pride that might come from a more UK-centric take on education, particularly in

subjects like history and English. (Translated literature is widely taught on IB programmes, unlike on A-level syllabuses.)

“The IB offers breadth, but A-levels offer depth – which is more important, and better for the student,” wrote Oxford University undergraduate India Lenon on her [Telegraph.co.uk](https://www.telegraph.co.uk) blog earlier this year. “We should be proud of a system that encourages sixth-formers to study the subjects they enjoy and intend to make use of in life, rather than forcing them to continue with things they may hate.”

Others believe the IB rivals A-levels in depth. In fact, a report published last year by the qualifications regulator Ofqual found the IB’s higher-level mathematics to be “more challenging” than its A-level counterpart.

And Julian Metcalf, UK associate manager for the IBO, believes that industry sees the IB’s benefits. He points out that salaries for IB school leavers in full-time employment is on average £20,500, compared with £19,000 for those with A-levels. He also highlights research commissioned by the British Council and Think Global (two charities promoting international education) suggesting that three-quarters of employers want young people to “think more globally” in order to prevent UK industries falling behind emerging economies such as China.

The Education Secretary Michael Gove appears to be a fan of the IB system. His plans for an “Advanced Baccalaureate” to replace A-levels, leaked last year, appeared remarkably similar to an IB diploma, with features including extended essays, voluntary work and contrasting subject choices.

With reform in the air, Metcalf thinks that more students might turn to IB programmes simply to ensure they end up with a qualification that has proven longevity. The IB is “free from political control or, for want of a better word, interference”, he says.

But the IB is still a minority choice, and students might worry that universities will not recognise it in the same way as A-levels. Ucas first recognised the IB diploma on its tariff system in 2006, and currently rates it so highly that a student achieving 30 diploma points – the world average – is awarded more Ucas points than an A-level candidate achieving two A grades and an A* grade. In practice, universities seem to ignore the Ucas tariff for IB students, and, in terms of Ucas points, give them lower, more easily achievable offers than A-level students.

But the lack of a reliable formal system to relate the two qualifications may still leave some IB students at a disadvantage. In March, King’s College London lowered its entry requirements for IB students to recognise that IB diploma points had not been rising in line with A-level grade inflation; it is not yet clear whether other universities have followed suit.

And last year, research by economists Francis Green and Anna Vignoles at the Institute of Education showed that, at least in years gone by, universities have been undervaluing the best IB students.

Green and Vignoles’ study tracked some 140,000 IB and A-level students who entered university between 2006 and 2008. Their hypothesis was that if the admissions process was fair,

then IB students rated by universities the same as A-level students ought to graduate, on average, with the same degree results.

For the most part, that was indeed the case. But the researchers found a discrepancy at the top level, so that IB students who had attained 37 points or more were four per cent more likely than equivalently rated A-level students to achieve a first-class degree. Although the study was not able to track students with the recently introduced A* grade A-levels, Green's hunch is that university admissions are still operating unfairly for the best IB students.

"It is such a good education in terms of its breadth," he says. "But I have never found any evidence that universities respect that."

None of this bothers the Finham Park students, who believe the extra work is worth it. They were surprised to find that the most important parts of their courses were not always the subjects they had chosen to specialise in.

"Theory of knowledge makes no sense to begin with," says Luke Cox, 18. "It's only at the end that you realise how important it is – that it's the most important subject."

Then Harriet chimes in. "Our understanding has been made so much better by our having been taught to think in different ways."