

The IB: a better preparation for life

The International Baccalaureate is gaining such respect that some universities have lowered their entry requirements for IB students, discovers Nick Morrison



The IB – here studied at Sevenoaks School – offers a much broader range of subjects Photo: Zak Waters/Alamy

By Nick Morrison

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Exam season is almost upon us, but before the blinkers go on, students still have time to think about what happens next. And for many taking GCSEs this summer, a key decision is whether to stick to the conventional A-levels or to change to the International Baccalaureate.

The IB is still a minority path in Britain, but for its supporters it offers the complete education.

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“It is a much better educational programme than A-levels,” says Paul Luxmoore. “I believe it is the best option for my students.”

Luxmoore, executive head teacher at Dane Court Grammar School in Broadstairs, Kent, says one of

the IB's biggest attractions is that it requires breadth of study. A-level students will typically take three or four subjects, while for the IB diploma they take six, three at standard level and three at higher.

But it is more than just two or three extras. At IB, students take a range of subjects including maths, English, a science, a foreign language and a humanities subject.

“With A-levels, young people tend to specialise in either sciences or the arts,” says Luxmoore. “But 16 is very early to specialise, particularly when you might be studying 13 or so subjects at GCSE and a month or so later you are expected to drop the vast majority. Making them continue with a broad range of subjects to 18 is a big advantage.”

Luxmoore suggests that an increasingly globalised society makes it important to be well rounded. Plugging on even when you find something difficult is also a good lesson in the importance of perseverance, he adds. “The English think it is OK to say they are no good at maths, but in India that is like saying you have no future,” he says. “I simply don't believe young people are good at either sciences or the arts. We have to help them believe they can be good at both.”

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The IB approach also encourages students to think for themselves, says Jeremy Lewis, head of school at ACS Egham International School in Surrey. Students explore links between the subjects, complete an extended essay involving private research, and take a course in theory of knowledge which aims to develop critical thinking.

All this makes the IB a better preparation for university than A-levels, Lewis believes. “Young people who think for themselves tend to make better students,” he says. The extended essay can also impress university admissions tutors. “It shows you can go into depth in a subject you're interested in,” he adds.

Another key element of the IB is that it has a moral purpose, says Robert Campbell, principal of Impington Village College in Cambridgeshire. Students have to undertake voluntary work as part of the creativity, action, service (CAS) element.

“It encourages students to look at their place in the world and the value of what they can contribute,” he says. “That is an incredibly empowering stance to take, and if we're not doing that, then we're not educating them.”

Although Impington has been running the IB for 20 years, it still has a small group who take A-levels. Campbell says this is partly a response to a continued demand for A-levels from some students, and recognition that in certain subjects, A-levels have the edge.

But while some schools run the two programmes in parallel, King Edward's School in Birmingham was unusual in switching wholesale from A-levels to the IB. Chief master John Claughton says the consistency and rigour of the IB was one of the main factors behind the decision.

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“There was a fundamental dissatisfaction with A-levels,” he says. “They are susceptible to political to-ings and fro-ings in education and the IB is above those changes.”

The consistency of IB grades compared with A-levels has led Leeds University and King's College London to lower their entry requirements for IB students for admission this autumn. Both universities have announced that they will consider 35 rather than 39 IB points – out of a possible 45 – as the equivalent of three As at A-level.

Government proposals to reform A-levels, announced earlier this month, aim to tackle fears of “grade inflation”, by making them more rigorous. Final grades will also be dependent on an end-of-course exam, bringing them into line with the IB.

These changes could make A-levels a more attractive option. But it is too early to say whether the promised rigour will be delivered, says Sue Kirkham, curriculum and assessment specialist for the Association of School and College Leaders.

Conversely, the IB could be made more appealing by the Government's decision to separate AS and A-levels. Rather than taking four or five subjects in year 12 and narrowing down to three or four in year 13, she suggests, students may be more likely to focus solely on their three or four subjects from the start.

But while the reforms could make it harder for A-levels to maintain a comparable breadth to the IB, they will not affect those entering year 12 this September. For these students, it is possible for A-level courses to incorporate many of the best elements of the IB programme, according to Jonathan Prest, principal of Barton Peveril Sixth Form College in Eastleigh, Hampshire.

Students at Barton Peveril are expected take part in extra-curricular activities broadly equivalent to the IB's CAS element, while an extended project offers the opportunity to complete a piece of

individual research.

“We can construct the merits of the IB through the A-level system,” says Prest. “The only thing missing is the directive that you have to do five out of six discipline areas.”

A-levels also benefit from familiarity among parents. When King’s College School in south-west London reintroduced A-levels last year after a six-year gap, applications jumped by 30-40 per cent, says headmaster Andrew Halls.

Some parents are still concerned that it will be harder for their child to get into university – despite evidence to the contrary – with an IB rather than A-levels. Admissions tutors have treated IB candidates unfavourably in the past, but Halls says this is no longer the case. “We have found the IB has served our pupils incredibly well,” he says.

King’s now runs the IB alongside A-level courses, and despite the popularity of the latter among some parents, Halls emphasises that he remains a firm supporter of the IB. “It is a fantastic qualification that suits most people,” he says.

The IB is a demanding course that requires students to be organised, according to Philip Harland, principal of Varndean College in Brighton, which also offers A-levels alongside the IB. “The IB requires a high level of commitment and staying power. The IB isn’t for everybody and the A-level route is perfectly suitable,” he adds. “A-levels get young people to where they want to be, but the IB has that extra dimension that means it is more than just doing the subjects.”

Andrea Auerbach is an IB student at Wellington College

I am currently studying the Middle Years Programme (MYP) of the International Baccalaureate, which encourages students to distinguish the relationship between classroom information and the world today.

In schools which, like mine, offer both GCSE and IB courses, there can be some tension between the rival camps. Each student is biased towards their course and believes that they are “smarter” than the other group.

In my opinion, the main difference between the two is that MYP aspires to teach students how to achieve a sense of independent inquiry, whereas GCSE teaches facts relevant to the examination.

Having experienced the MYP style of teaching, I am convinced that the programme is the most beneficial. To those who believe that students pick their subjects too early: in comparison with the

GCSE course, MYP is favourable in terms of being developmentally appropriate.

Am I saying that it is impossible to flourish if you choose the GCSE path? No. If you perform well under pressure, I would recommend GCSE.

I simply want to raise awareness for the benefits of the IB programme. I feel that the course is unrecognised, which to me is a shame considering its brilliance.

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