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Why schools love the International Baccalaureate

By Sophie Morris

The International Baccalaureate is highly prized by university admissions officers and gives students skills they can use all their lives

It is a rare thing indeed for teachers, pupils and university lecturers to agree, but representatives from all three groups are big fans of the International Baccalaureate (IB). From a standing start as a niche sixth-form qualification for a privileged few in the Seventies, the IB is now available at 190 schools across the UK.

Recent research carried out by ACS International Schools, whose schools have taught the IB for more than 30 years, reveals an IB diploma is the most respected post-16 qualification among university admissions officers. Though few of them wish to see A-levels phased out, 62 per cent praise the IB for the way it encourages pupils to manage their own timetable, 78 per cent say it is harder to achieve a top IB grade than a top A-level grade, and 73 per cent would like to see it offered in more state schools.

IB students do a broader range of subjects than typical A-level students, taking six subjects - three at standard level, three at higher level - which means they are less limited when it comes to choosing what to pursue at university level.

However, it is not the assessments of the core subjects but the additional components that stand out in the IB programme, and receive praise from pupils, teachers and universities. These include an extended essay of 4,000 words, and "creativity, action, service" (CAS), which requires students (above) to take part in artistic, sporting and community pursuits throughout the study period. The latter element is intended to foster awareness of life outside the academic arena.

Monika Howick, the principal of ACS Hillingdon International School, says the extended essay really prepares students for university. "They appreciate that we do a lot of essay writing," she says. CAS equips students with skills that they will use for the rest of their lives, she says. "Being involved in the community consistently over a period of two years is a really important aspect of the IB. Universities are also looking for soft skills, and it shows they have the balance between studying hard and having the time and energy for other things," says Howick.

A third requirement, theory of knowledge, runs across the chosen subjects and is designed to help the students think laterally about learning and to gain an appreciation of other cultural perspectives.

Liam Howlett is about to begin the second year of his music, theatre and entertainment management course at the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts, having done the IB at Warminster School. He can't say if having an IB score of 29 (the top mark is 45) helped him win the place, but during his first year he has had positive feedback from his tutors on how the IB has prepared him for the jump from school to degree level. "They all say they really love the IB," he says.

In particular, Howlett is sure that completing the extended essay has helped him through his first year, thanks to the experience of researching and annotating a long piece of writing.

Universities laud the independent thinking and creativity the IB encourages in students - skills which last beyond university and into the world of work - that are invaluable, but very difficult to teach in a classroom.

Plenty of schools are pleased with their foray into the IB. Warminster received its first results in 2008 and ended up ranked 21st in the country; this year, one student achieved 44 points. Felsted School in Essex has also just received its second year of results, and its director of studies, John Shaw, says most IB students have won a place at their first choice of university. When Gresham's School in north Norfolk got a new headmaster, Philip John, he brought with him the IB, which he had introduced at King William's College on the Isle of Man. Gresham's, too, is very happy with its first crop of results. The average score of 35 is equivalent to four A grades at A-level.

Most schools run the IB and A-levels concurrently. The Manchester Grammar School will get its first IB results next year, and has avoided separating the two groups of learners by placing them in mixed IB and A-level form groups.

Yet because the IB is compared to taking five or six A-levels, less capable and confident students might be put off. When Howlett chose the IB, most of his friends stuck with A-levels, unsure about the new qualification. He is keen to point out that the IB is "not just for clever people", despite its reputation for rigour. "I'm an all-rounder, but don't excel in any subject. The physics was really hard, but the fact that I managed it shows that anyone can," he says.