

International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme

Frequently Asked Questions

1 Do universities recognise and welcome the IB?

The IB is recognised not just in the UK, but in countries all over the world. Universities like the fact that IB is not subject to political interference from governments; that its grades are not inflated and thus, over time, devalued; and that its grading system allows them to differentiate so clearly between students. “Because the IB differentiates better than A-levels, [...] if we are hesitating about making an offer at all, we would be more likely to make an offer to an IB student than an A-level student” – Dr Geoff Parks, Director of Admissions at Cambridge University.

Universities welcome the IB and respect its academic rigour. They know that IB students have a wider perspective on their studies and that it provides a good preparation for university and beyond. They also find that IB students, when they arrive to start their courses, already possess superior skills in research and analytical thinking, and that they are good independent learners and able to take responsibility for their own work. “IB is well known to us for excellent preparations. Success in an IB program correlates well with success at Harvard. We are always pleased to see the credentials of the IB Diploma program on the transcript” – Marilyn McGrath Lewis, Director of Undergraduate Admission, Harvard University.

Employers also respect it: the Chairman of BT recently admired the way in which it promotes breadth of understanding and avoids too much specialisation too early.

2 How is the IB assessed?

In each of the six subjects, whether taken at Higher or Standard Level, you can score a maximum of seven points. Three additional points are available for a combination of Theory of Knowledge and Extended Essay. The maximum is thus 45 points. The minimum required to achieve the Diploma is 24 points.

3 Exactly how much coursework is there on the IB course?

All subjects have some coursework, or ‘internal assessment’. Typically, it accounts for between 25-30% of the total mark for each subject.

4 Are coursework deadlines evenly spaced?

We do the majority of coursework in year two of the course to allow for maturation. We recognise the need to spread the burden of work as sensibly as we can to avoid points of

unreasonable pressure during the year. To achieve this, we produce a schedule of internal deadlines that spreads the work out over the year from September to March. We publish this schedule for the year ahead at the end of year one of the course.

5 Is IB an accepted programme for those wanting to go on to study Medicine?

Yes. Good doctors are well-rounded and possess, besides expertise in their specialist area, a broad range of other skills. IB gives students the opportunity to develop some of these and to develop curiosity and an awareness of other areas of human experience.

6 I want to study Natural Sciences – is the IB an appropriate course for me?

Yes, because it allows higher level study of two natural sciences – Chemistry plus either Biology or Physics – and the study of Mathematics. This meets the entry requirements of UK universities.

7 Is the IB just for the academically strongest students?

No. It is designed for students representing a broad range of ability. The Diploma Programme pass range, in terms of total points, extends, after all, from 24 up to 45. Naturally, academic ability is needed – the IB DP is an academic programme – but it is at least as important that those who do the IB are self-motivated, well organised and unafraid of a challenge.

8 Will I really be able to cope with six different subject areas?

The breadth of the course is certainly a major part of the challenge it presents. The IB believes that a good education means maintaining breadth of learning up to the end of secondary education. Thus, you have to study English (a literature course), a foreign language, Maths, a natural science and a ‘human’ science, plus one further subject. Your final IB score is the sum of your score in each subject, plus potential additional points. Weakness in any one area can affect your final score. However, this does not mean that you have to be exceptional at every subject. Remember that you do not have to study every subject to the same level: you take three (your best subjects) to Higher Level and three others to Standard Level. However, to get a good overall final score, you do have to be prepared to work hard at all your subjects.

9 Will I really be able to cope with the ongoing work load at IB?

The main difference, in terms of work-load, between IB and A Level comes in year two of the course: in year one, IB and A Level students have exactly the same number of timetabled lessons; in year two, A Level candidates usually drop a subject.

There is no doubt that the IB demands a readiness to work hard and to invest time in study. It is not the easy option for the Sixth Form: it does require a commitment to academic work. The advantage of this is that it will improve your time management skills and get the best out of you in a way that less challenging courses will not. Moreover, it is very good preparation for the reality of life after school. If you do the work when it is set, instead of putting it off and letting it build up, you will cope.

10 If I opt for the IB, will I still be able to do my extra-curricular activities to my preferred level?

The IB Diploma Programme includes an extra-curricular requirement; it aims to develop the whole person. It is perfectly compatible with sport, music, drama and other activities. Many of our IB students are also talented sportsmen, musicians and actors. However, the more you do, the more effective your time management must be, and it is important to find a good balance between academic work and other commitments.

11 If I'm not very good at Maths, does that rule out the IB for me?

Certainly not. The IB offers Maths at three levels. The best mathematicians take it at Higher Level; Standard Level Maths is also quite challenging. However, if your interest lies in other areas of the curriculum, you can do Maths Studies, an accessible course designed to take you a little way beyond GCSE.

12 Will I get the depth I need in my specialist subjects on the IB Diploma Programme?

Yes. Higher Level in an IB subject is perfectly good preparation for university courses in that subject; many UCAS offers ask for Higher Level points in the most relevant subjects. For certain highly specialist courses at certain universities – Engineering at Cambridge is a case in point – there is a preference for a heavy Sixth Form concentration on Maths, Further Maths and Physics that the IB does not offer. This is an exception. That said, IB students do still gain places on such courses.

13 What do the terms 'Theory of Knowledge', 'Extended Essay' and 'CAS' actually mean, and what are their benefits?

Theory of Knowledge teaches you to think critically and to see the deeper connections between areas of your education that might not be visible on the surface. It puts you on your guard against bias and preconceptions and makes you aware of the factors governing your own thinking. It gets you ask yourself how we know and to seek evidence for knowledge claims, beliefs, opinions and arguments. As Professor A.C. Grayling has written:

“the most advanced and successful societies, in point of technological and social development and economic power, are precisely those where critical evaluation of orthodoxy has been most encouraged.

Let's bring the general point here down to the particular. In the range of contemporary styles of school education on offer in the UK by far the best is the International Baccalaureate. One of its compulsory elements is theory of knowledge, a course aimed at getting students to reflect critically on diverse ways of knowing and on areas of knowledge, and to consider the role and nature of knowledge in our own culture & in other cultures.”

The Extended Essay is a 4000-word research project that allows you to investigate in depth an aspect of one of your favourite subjects. It teaches you the disciplines of academic inquiry and gives you an opportunity to show commitment to a subject that you may well want to read at university. Universities value this aspect of the IB very highly.

Creativity, Action and Service: this (CAS) acknowledges the importance of extra-curricular activities in a full and rounded education. IB students have to participate in some way in artistic activities, sport and community service. The programme aims to challenge and extend the individual student, develop a spirit of discovery and self-reliance, encourage new skills and interests and inspire a sense of responsibility towards all members of the community.

14 What are the specific advantages of the IB as a Sixth Form programme at Bedford School?

Quite simply, because of the level of demand that it makes and because it will stretch you, the IB is likely to get the best out of you, and you are likely to get more out of it. Secondly, it is a non-modular programme that teaches you to see subjects in an integrated rather than a fragmented way and it will thus give you a good overall understanding. Finally, it will give you an excellent preparation for the world beyond school and will equip you admirably for university because it will teach you to be self-reliant.

15 What have our results been like?

At Bedford School, we now have six full sets of IB results from 2005-2010 inclusive. In that time we have presented over 200 candidates. Our *average* points score is 37. An individual candidate who scored 37 points would be in the top 10-11% of candidates world-wide.