

WHAT'S IN A LETTER?

EDUCATION EXPERTS FROM HONG KONG AND THE UK WEIGH IN ON THE INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE DIPLOMA VERSUS A-LEVELS: WHICH ONE WILL HELP YOUR CHILD STAND OUT? **EMILIE YABUT-RAZON** INVESTIGATES



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To many parents, making the decision to put their child through the General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced Levels or the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme can be nerve-wracking. Once your child steps into secondary school, they'll face the intimidating decision of what educational path to choose. The two pre-university streams in Hong Kong, if they're planning to study abroad for their degree, are the A-levels and the IB Diploma. While both curriculums prepare students for entry to university, there are core differences between them. Knowing these differences can assist you and your child to make a more informed choice, and help your child to secure a place at university.

The IB has expanded further within the international school sector to include the English Schools Foundation (ESF) network. After working with an A-levels curriculum for more than 40 years, ESF began switching over in 2007. Today, all five of its secondary schools and its two colleges offer the

IB Diploma. Judy Cooper, the head of ESF secondary school King George V in Ho Man Tin, says that as a group of international schools, ESF believes that the IB Diploma suits the majority of their students, who will go on to study and work all over the world. "We also offer the BTEC Extended Diploma, which is aimed at students who want to specialise and prefer ongoing assessment rather than final examinations," she adds.

There are only a handful of international schools in Hong Kong offering A-levels. In fact, on the most recent list of private secondary schools on the Education Bureau's website, only three mention A-levels as part of their curriculum. Among them is Harrow International School. James Martin, the director of studies at Harrow, sees A-levels as the natural step after (I)GCSE. "A-levels build on the knowledge and skills students develop the year before, and they are established qualifications that have been used to benchmark student abilities for more than 60 years," he says.

A-LEVELS VS IB DIPLOMA



A-LEVELS

YOU ARE SUITED FOR THIS IF YOU:



- Are stronger in a few subjects
- Are more academic, prefer taking exams
- Want to pursue competitive degrees, like medicine
- Want in-depth knowledge on specific topics



IB DIPLOMA

YOU ARE SUITED FOR THIS IF YOU:



- Are an all-rounder with a broader interest range
- Are able to multitask
- Like writing and research tasks
- Are creative and inquisitive

A-LEVELS VS IB DIPLOMA



A-LEVELS

YOU ARE NOT SUITED FOR THIS IF YOU:



- Dislike taking exams
- Prefer classroom interaction and coursework
- Want to pursue practical-oriented degrees



IB DIPLOMA

YOU ARE NOT SUITED FOR THIS IF YOU:



- Want the fastest route to a degree
- Tend to be more academic
- Want to focus on a few subjects

Martin emphasises that A-levels are also highly valued by universities, especially in the UK. Due to the scarcity of Hong Kong schools offering A-levels, Harrow provides an advantage. "Many of our staff have been A-levels examiners," he explains. "They're experienced teachers of A-levels and understand the syllabi and examinations process. We are providing students and parents with a distinctive choice and the opportunity to remain in Hong Kong, rather than go to the UK to study A-levels."

Jess Harris, head of education consultancy Quintessentially Education, explains that the key difference between the A-levels and the IB programmes is that an IB student will study a minimum of six subjects—inclusive of a language and an essay-based subject—"therefore covering a broad range of content, whereas an A-level student will study a minimum of three subjects, but will usually explore these in greater depth."

"With A-levels, students can opt for subject combinations according to their interests, strengths and their target university's requirements, whereas IB students must cover a range of sciences, maths, humanities and a language. Students in IB need to demonstrate strong writing ability for compulsory components like the Theory of Knowledge (to develop critical thinking) and the Extended Essay (to improve research skills)."

But is one truly better than the other?

"With regards to which is the more beneficial system, we believe that this comes down to the individual student, and their independent strengths and learning styles," says Harris. "If a student is stronger in the science subjects and wants to follow a career in medicine, for example, then it may work best for that student to do A-levels—as they will have the opportunity to specialise earlier. If a student is strong across the board and

"BOTH CURRICULA ARE RIGOROUS AND WILL CHALLENGE EVEN THE MOST ACADEMICALLY ABLE STUDENT"

universities in the US and Canada, the IB is very well received—in fact, some schools don't even require students to sit the SAT or an entrance exam if they are armed with an IB Diploma. In the UK, however, it seems that more universities still lean towards the UK-developed A-levels. Martin says the reason for this may be due to those universities understanding the qualifications better. "In previous years, it did seem to be the case that A-levels were the preference and that IB offers were tougher than those received by students studying A-levels," he says. "This was predominantly since the IB was relatively unknown and misunderstood—these universities were not familiar with the requirements originally, thus offers were higher and more competitive. However, this is certainly not the case today; we are now seeing a significant shift, with the clear majority of top universities now recognising and highly regarding the IB as equivalent to the A-levels."

Cooper is quick to add that since UK universities now have a much better understanding of the benefits of the IB, they appreciate the additional elements such as Theory of Knowledge and Creativity, Activity and Service. "They like the fact that the course goes beyond the specialist subjects," she says. "And they love the Extended Essay element, as this shows how students can formulate their own research question and carry out the research, much like they would do at university."

A-levels, according to Harris, is one whose strengths and weaknesses are clear; those who will excel at IB have a broader interest range and score well across the board.

"From my experience, students who would enjoy the full autonomy over subject choice and those who would enjoy more content-heavy learning may prefer A-levels," says Ma. "On the other hand, students who embrace the IB philosophy tend to enjoy the cultural element embedded in the subject learning, as well as the heavier skills component of IB teaching and requirements. They may also wish to have a breadth of exposure across the humanities and sciences—though the same could be achieved with A-levels should a student wish to opt for a broad combination of subject choice."

In the end, all four experts agree that the decision is dependent on what's best for the student given their learning preferences and future aspirations. "The IB Diploma is a broad, balanced curriculum, while the A-levels are more appropriate for students who want to specialise in fewer subjects," says Cooper. "Both curricula are rigorous and will challenge even the most academically able students. The grading is very different and hard to compare, though, so it's worth really understanding all the factors before you make a decision."

Martin concludes with some very sound advice: "Take your child to