

IB or A levels?

HOW TO MAKE AN INFORMED DECISION

MARK SELDON, director of studies at Gresham's School in Holt, looks at the pros and cons of A levels and the increasingly popular International Baccalaureate

WE ARE the only school in the county to offer the International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma programme and A levels and I believe it is vital to equip parents, as well as pupils, with the right information to make informed decisions about sixth form options. We are currently going through the biggest shake up to education in a generation so it's important that schools outline exactly what is involved in both the less-familiar IB diploma but also the much-changed A level.

HOW DIFFERENT WILL THE A LEVEL OR IB DIPLOMA EXPERIENCE BE?

An IB diploma timetable is similar to a GCSE timetable, with six subjects plus the IB diploma 'core' (consisting of an extended essay, creativity, activity and service (CAS) and a theory of knowledge course) there is more contact time with teachers. Due to IB diploma students having a fuller working day the IB emphasises positive learning habits to help students work more efficiently independently. The IB diploma has internationalism inherently at its heart too and so the students' curriculum will focus more on topics within a global context, with a local focus, rather than fixed curriculum topics.

For the first time in 20 years A level students have an end-loaded examination process. They are assessed on everything they have learnt at the end of their two years of Sixth Form, and in this respect both options now offer a similar assessment experience.

MYTH BUSTING

The biggest myth is that the IB diploma takes up too much time. The evidence against this is clear in that our students have been successfully completing the programme for the past 10 years. The other enormous myth is that the IB is only for the very brightest. It actually suits learners with a range of different requirements and learning styles because additional contact time with teachers can be beneficial to students



Mark Seldon, Gresham's director of studies

who work better with more guidance.

We encourage all of our students to consider the diploma and have never turned anyone down; you can achieve whatever you want and you will be rewarded for everything that you do. The core elements of the IB also provide an opportunity for students to demonstrate a different type of achievement; many students credit the creativity, activity and service element of the programme as being the most rewarding of their school days, and many have gone on to careers inspired by their CAS experiences.

WHAT'S THE SIMPLEST WAY TO CHOOSE?

We usually reverse-engineer from where a student wants to end up. If they have broad horizons, are looking to work or study abroad, or are hoping to study a course that has multiple strands to it, we would suggest that they continue to demonstrate that they can achieve across a broad programme by opting for the IB diploma. If they are aiming for a highly competitive course or university the IB may well enable them

to stand out from the crowd; diploma students have a 57% greater likelihood of attending one of the top 20 UK universities than students who study traditional A levels according to research commissioned last year by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).

If a student is really unsure, we recommend that they opt for the IB diploma – its broader offering enables students to keep their options open for longer. The diploma also provides flexibility for those who have a plan in mind but might have a change of heart; higher level subjects can be lowered to standard level and vice versa as plans change after the start of the programme, for example. There is no better alternative to equip students with the tools they need to propel themselves forward; it is difficult to find any reason not to recommend the IB.

DECADE OF IB AT GRESHAM'S

Gresham's has seen its 229th student complete the International Baccalaureate diploma Programme, a decade after first introducing it.

Douglas Robb, headmaster, said: "The breadth of aspiration and ambition that the IB imbues in our students is a powerful tool which has motivated them to broaden their horizons when considering university and career options. The diploma provides a very well-rounded education that equips young people to do well in life, beyond education; it is about life skills as much as it is about academic learning and, through the IB, Gresham's students become engaged in the wider community.

"It is testament to the school's foresight and the decision taken a decade ago – to fly the flag for the IB and by so doing offer our students genuine choice about their futures – that we are now celebrating this milestone. We are very proud to see our 10th IB cohort graduate this summer and, through offering an internationally-recognised gold standard education, our students are prepared for life – we can't wait to see what they will do next." ♦