

A Levels or IB Diploma

The first and most important thing to state in any comparison of these two programmes aimed at 16 to 17 year olds seeking to enter University is to emphasise that they are both very good.

Very different in many regards...but both very good.

The second point to emphasise is that both are accepted equally widely. The IB diploma is essentially a qualification run and managed by the Swiss based International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO) and the A Level, administered by the University of Cambridge in the UK, is the qualification taken in thousands of British Schools both in the UK and beyond.

It would be unjust to claim that either offers either a better education or a better passport to Universities around the world than the other. Indeed good grades in EITHER can result in up to one years credit at Universities in the USA and of course entry to University in the UK is a given. Canada, Australia and many other countries recognise both officially and both provide an excellent route into the course of choice for the hardworking student.

So why is it correct to say that they are different?

The IB Diploma takes a more generalist approach in many regards with students having to complete 6 subject areas in addition to a general epistemological course called Theory of Knowledge or "TOK". In addition they must complete an extended essay over the two years of the course and at least 3 hours a week of Creativity Action Service or "CAS" activities over the course of the two years adding up to around 150 hours as a minimum. Academic subjects are chosen at higher level or standard level and students must choose three of each from varying option blocks.

The requirement to choose from blocks of options as laid down by the IBO means students must study at least two languages, generally their "first" language and one other. Students must also continue to study some area of Mathematics, arts, humanities and sciences. Some small amount of flexibility is allowed in that students can opt to study additional sciences or languages by sacrificing the arts option.

So the IB Diploma is a course that encourages and requires students to continue a wide range of courses and also a great commitment to none subject specific requirements such as CAS, TOK and the extended essay.

On the other hand A Levels (which stands for "Advanced level") offer a much more focussed approach to University entrance studies.

Most students will choose to take three subjects at A level and will focus their subject choice on areas of interest and in which they will succeed.

So for an example, a budding young doctor would study Mathematics, Chemistry and one other subject (often a second science) whereas a budding linguist would study English, Chinese and French. Some students find the flexibility and freedom a liberating experience. A budding classical scholar may be relieved to no longer have to study mathematics!

Indeed in some cases A levels offer a more secure route to University entry as a student is able to focus on subjects they like and are therefore likely to do well in. Many of us recall the horror of sitting in a class we found dull or frustrating and the fact that this often led to a poor grade in that area.

Each A level subject is studied in a great deal more depth than the equivalent on the Diploma course. Thus success at A level in 3 (or sometimes 4) subjects is equal in the eyes of Universities to the 9 Subjects (6 + CAS, TOK and the essay) of Diploma.

Students and parents need to make this most critical of decisions with all the information at hand and carefully weigh up this most important of choices.

Both curriculums offer rigour, interest and international acceptance in equal measure. A levels are regarded by some Universities as “slightly preferable” but equally some regard IB Diploma in the same light but the important point is that a student with good grades in either will be accepted everywhere. None the less each is very different from the other and a thorough investigation is always worthwhile.

For more information about A Levels visit;

<http://www.cie.org.uk/qualifications/academic/uppersec/alevel/overview>

For more information about IB Diploma visit;

<http://www.ibo.org/diploma/curriculum/group4/index.cfm>