



ACS INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS

Cobham Egham Hillingdon

London, England

CHOICE AND QUALITY

Understanding UK post-16 choices and higher education



An ACS International Schools special report

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The wider the choice, the harder it is to make a decision with confidence. In the UK, the choice of exam systems available for 16–19 year olds has increased significantly in the past few years and parents and students are faced with a choice of A levels, new Diploma, the International Baccalaureate Diploma, the AQA Diploma and the Cambridge pre-U as well as the Welsh Baccalaureate Advanced Diploma in Wales and Scottish Highers in Scotland.

Our survey of UK university admissions officers, now in its fourth consecutive year, is designed to help parents and students make informed decisions about choosing the right exam system for them. Through the provision of independently collected data, the report also provides valuable information for educators and policy-makers to inform their thinking regarding post-16 qualifications.

The world has changed dramatically since we conducted the survey last year: few countries in the world have escaped the impact of the radically different financial and environmental conditions. In this context it is even more important to make the right decision about schooling and exams, not least because we need to prepare today's students to thrive in a complex and rapidly changing world.

As competition for university places continues to increase, admissions officers appear this year to be much more accepting of the range of qualifications before them than they have in previous surveys. However, while valuing highly the UK's main post-16 qualification, the A level, there is a strong underlying view that students are forced to focus too heavily on sitting, and often re-sitting exams; and teachers on 'teaching to the test'. In this way the development of the very skills such as creativity and independent learning needed to thrive in higher education and in the workplace is being sacrificed.

The IB Diploma stands out and is recognised across all types of universities as an indicator of a student who can thrive at university, one who is highly prized for qualities of independent learning, good self management skills and creativity.

'Independence' is the watchword for 2009. Valued as a quality of thinking in students, and as a quality in the teaching and learning process itself, it is the perceived absence of independence which respondents believe is causing otherwise well regarded exam systems to fail their students. Only 21 per cent of university admissions officers, for example, feel that A levels encourage independent thinking, while 100 per cent of them say it is a key skill they are looking for in their students.

The vast majority of university admissions officers in our survey, 82 per cent, believe that the greatest threat to the quality of post-16 education in the UK is government intervention.

However it is government initiative which inspired the new Diplomas, and our survey also showed that this exam system is valued by admissions officers more highly than some commentators would suggest.

We hope that in conducting this survey ACS International Schools is providing some fresh thinking and insight into the education choices now available in the UK, and helping parents and students to choose the right course for them with confidence.

Fergus Rose, ACS International Schools

Summary of Findings

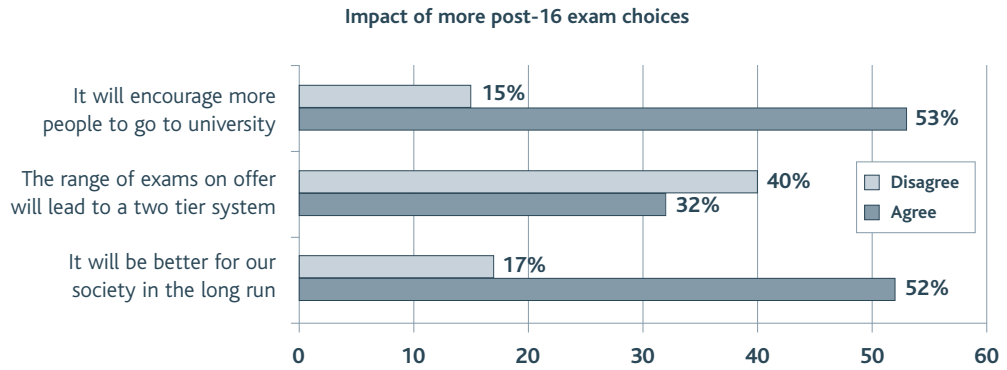
- 60 admissions officers from universities across England, Scotland and Wales took part in the survey this year, the fourth year it has been conducted.
- Respondents were drawn from the three main types of universities, pre-1992 universities, post-1992 universities and 'other' higher education institutes (HEIs.)
- Admissions officers work in departments which each process on average 14,000 applications every year and of these 275 are from applicants who have the IB Diploma.
- The availability of more exam choice – this survey highlighted the new Diploma, the AQA Diploma, the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma and the Cambridge pre-U in addition to A levels – is considered a positive benefit to our society.
- Concerns that greater choice will lead to a two-tier system have decreased year on year, with 32 per cent of respondents fearing it could lead to a two tier society in 2009 compared to 47 per cent in 2008.
- Admissions officers are united in their belief that the most important quality which exams should encourage in students to help them thrive at university is an ability to pursue independent inquiry.
- Approaches to learning such as self-management skills and an open mind are considered more important than in-depth subject expertise in terms of thriving at university.
- A levels have the lowest score for encouraging independent inquiry in students, compared with every other exam system.
- Admissions officers at 'other' HEIs are more likely to look for the qualities of creativity, citizenship and business skills in exam systems than admissions officers at pre- and post-1992 universities.
- The IB Diploma is the most widely regarded exam choice across every university type, rated especially highly for encouraging independent inquiry, self management skills and an ability to cope with pressure.
- The new Diploma is also highly regarded and offers a very good profile match to the qualities which 'other' HEIs believe will help their students to thrive.
- It is widely understood that it is much harder to achieve the top score of 45 in the IB Diploma than it is to achieve 3 As at A level.
- There are signs that university admissions officers do not appreciate the detail and qualities of the IB Diploma programme when assessing candidates who offer scores in the middle ranges from 24 – 30 points.
- University admissions officers attribute A level exam grade inflation to being able to re-sit exams, teachers teaching to the test and both students and teachers working harder.
- Despite acknowledging A level grade inflation and issues springing from the pressure to achieve higher grades through league table performance, admissions officers support A levels and three quarters do not want to see the exam phased out at any stage.
- The vast majority, 82 per cent, of admissions officers believe that the greatest threat to the quality of post-16 education in the UK is government intervention.
- Declining standards of behaviour among students is also an issue. Increasing the school leaving age commands the support of a minority, 40 per cent, of admissions officers.
- Admissions officers expect to see more applicants with the IB Diploma, and three quarters would like to see the qualification available in more state schools.
- The quality of careers advice in schools and colleges relating to post-16 exam choices and university choices is not rated very highly by respondents. An area of particular concern is the low score given to advice relating to choosing between work or university.

EXAM SYSTEM

IMPACT OF CHOICE

University admissions officers feel positively about the increased range of exam systems now available in the UK, and the majority believe that the surge of new qualifications, ranging from the new Diploma, the IB Diploma, the AQA Diploma and the Cambridge pre-U will actually encourage more people to go to university.

The chart below shows that 53 per cent believe the greater choice will encourage more people to go to university, and 52 per cent think it will be better for our society in the long run.



Q. How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the potential impact of more exam choices being available?

Although a third of admissions officers agree that the range of choice might lead to a two-tier system, a greater proportion, 40 per cent, disagree with this statement, and don't think the choice will be divisive. In fact, fears of the creation of a 'two tier' system have declined year on year, despite the backdrop of media and business commentary on the issue¹ over this time.

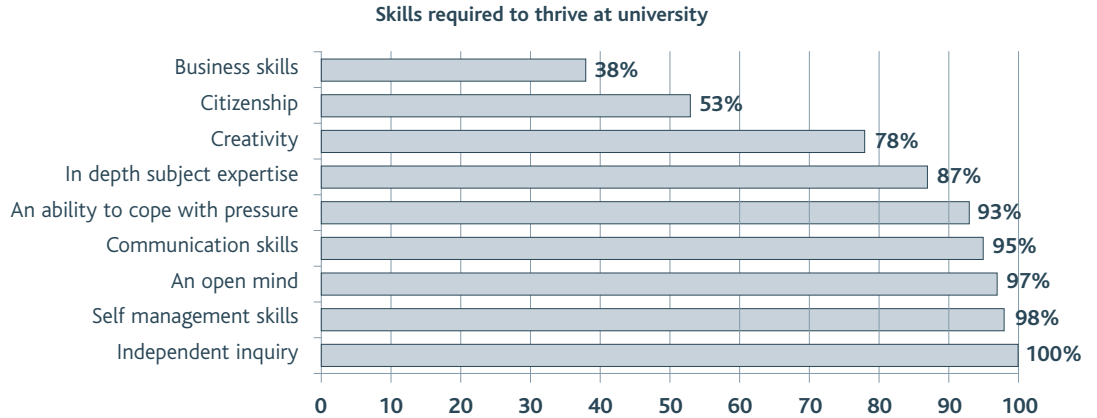
Last year almost half, 47 per cent, of university admissions officers agreed that the range of exams on offer could lead to a two tier system, a figure which has dropped to 32 per cent this year.

¹ Richard Lambert, director-general of the CBI June 2008 "Going ahead with these plans [for a new wave of academic diplomas] without tackling concerns, could lead to a fractured two-tier education system with private schools opting for GCSEs and A levels while state schools use diplomas."

CORE VALUES

Admissions officers are looking for students who will thrive at their university. This research shows they believe, unequivocally, that the most essential skills required to thrive at university are an ability to work independently and good self-management skills.

While in-depth subject expertise is important, with 87 per cent admissions officers citing this as a quality required to thrive at university, it is not considered to be such a fundamental building block as knowing how to pursue an independent line of inquiry.

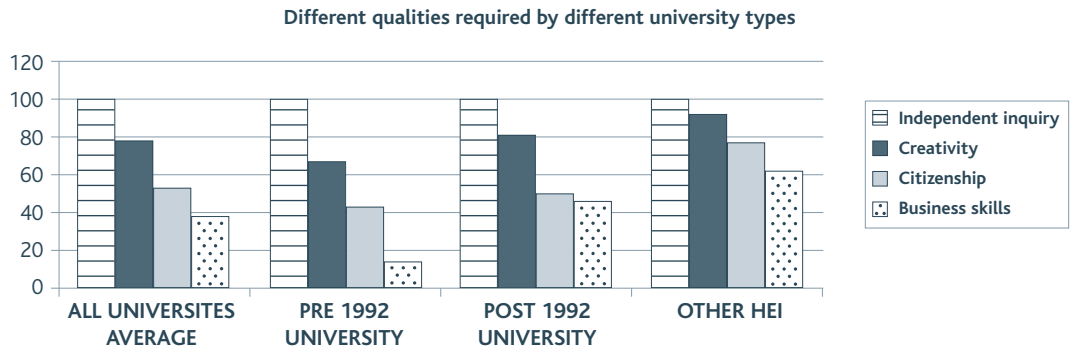


Q. Which of these qualities do you think is valuable in helping a student to thrive at university?

In fact, as indicators of success at university, approaches to learning and investigation seem to be rated more highly than subject knowledge. For example, possessing an open mind, good communication skills and an ability to cope with pressure are all considered more important than in-depth subject expertise.

Creativity, an intangible quality which most would agree cannot be 'revised', is a quality which just over three quarters, 78 per cent, of admissions officers think helps students to thrive at university.

The expectations of university admissions officers in respect of exam and student qualities do vary quite markedly between university types, reflecting the university's heritage and course offering. 'Other' HEIs place a much greater emphasis for example on the importance of creativity and business skills. All, however, agree 100 per cent that encouraging independent inquiry is the most valuable quality in helping a student to thrive at university.



Q. Which of these qualities do you think is valuable in helping a student to thrive at university?

How closely do the different exam systems now available in England and Wales, match the skill requirements of UK universities?

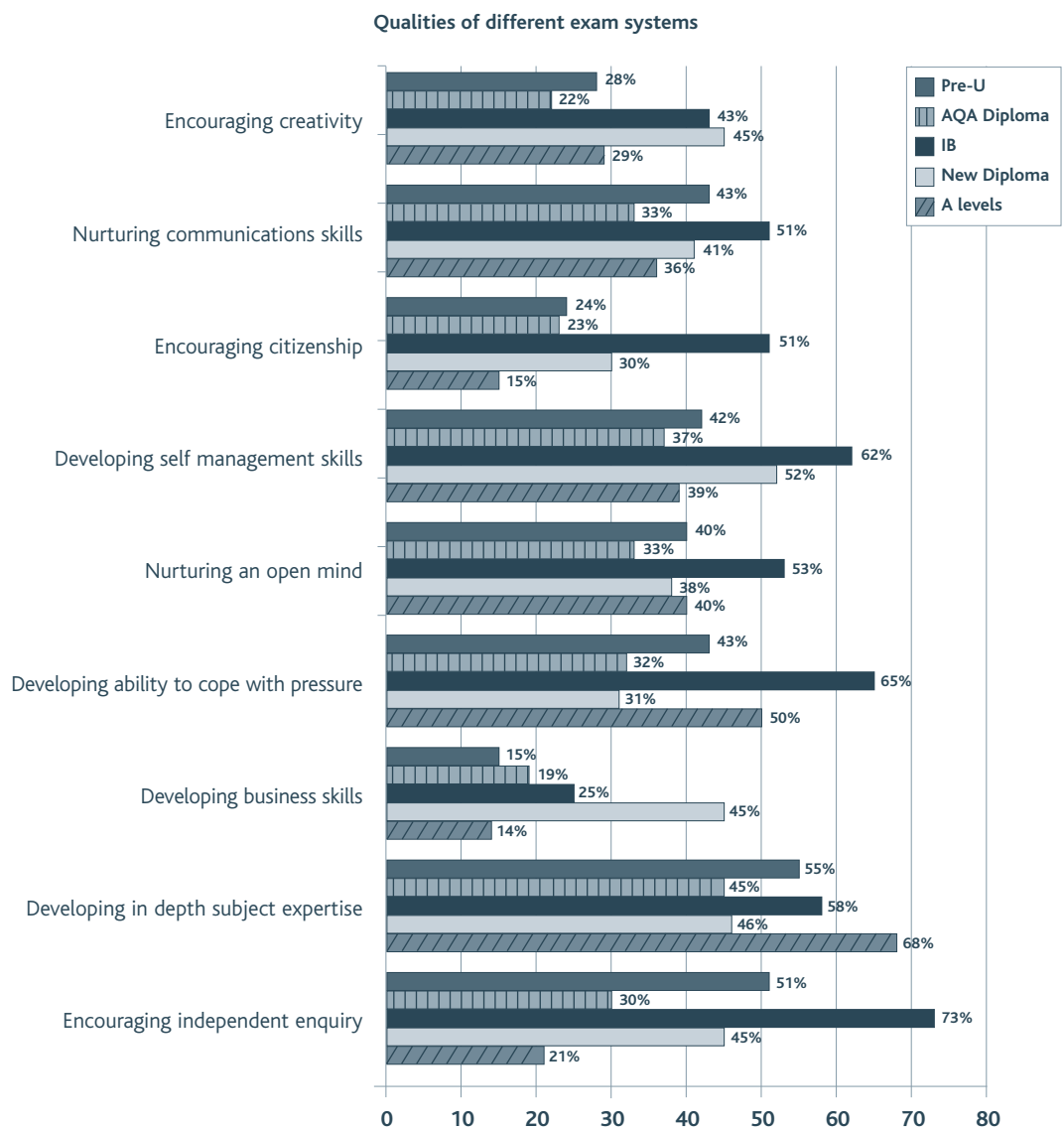
EXAM VALUE PROFILES

"Most universities complain of students who can't think for themselves and manage their own study. That is because of the mechanistic style of learning in A levels and GCSEs." (Shadow Secretary of State for higher education, David Willetts, The Guardian 20th May 2009.)

Is this sweeping statement true? The results from our survey suggest it is; university admissions officers feel that A levels in particular are not developing the capacity for independent inquiry in its students, a skill which they consider essential for the most successful university experience.

In fact A levels have the lowest score of all exam types, with only 21 per cent of admissions officers feeling that the exam system develops this quality in its students.

Q. How strong an element would you say each of the following elements are of each exam system: quite or very strong elements only.

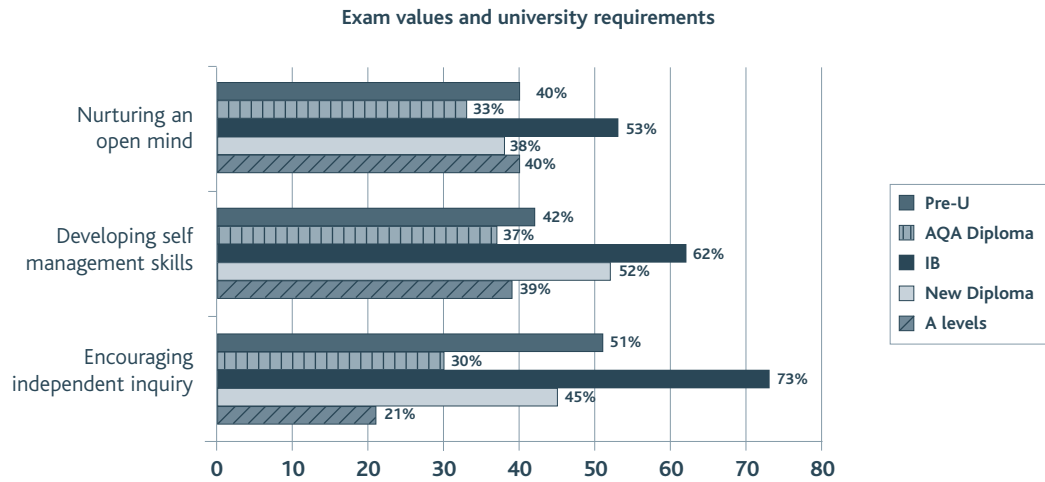


The IB Diploma is by far the most highly rated exam system in terms of the relevant qualities it instills in its students. The chart below looks at the top three qualities needed to thrive at university, and shows clearly the pre-eminent position of the IB in university admissions officers' minds.

The new Diploma is well perceived too, and especially well matched to the requirements of 'Other' HEIs, which are expecting to see many more applicants with this qualification in the next few years.

The Cambridge pre-U, the only exam system to be developed by a university itself through Cambridge University International Examinations is rated more highly than A levels in encouraging independent inquiry, but is still scored significantly lower than the IB Diploma. Almost half, 51 per cent, of admission officers believe the pre-U encourages independent inquiry compared to 73 per cent who feel the IB develops this quality in its students.

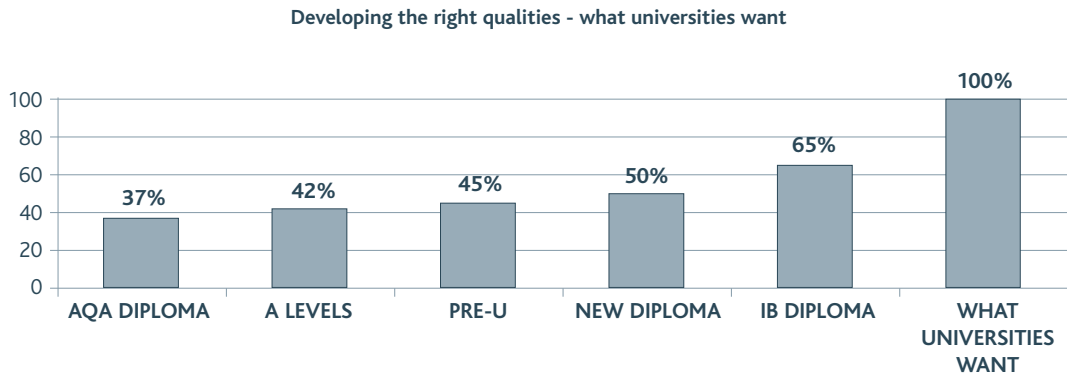
Respondents were given an option of no comment if they didn't know about any of the exam systems in question. The AQA Diploma is perhaps the least well known of these qualifications among the general public, being a new qualification developed jointly by the AQA and City & Guilds.



Q. How strong an element would you say each of the following are of each exam system: quite or very strong agreement only.

By aggregating the percentage scores of all the different exam systems against each value it develops in its students, and comparing this to the 100 per cent expected by admissions officers, overall comparisons between the different exam systems can be made.

The chart shown below shows that while the IB Diploma is the most highly regarded qualification, the new Diplomas are viewed very positively among university admissions officers in terms of developing the skills required to thrive at university.

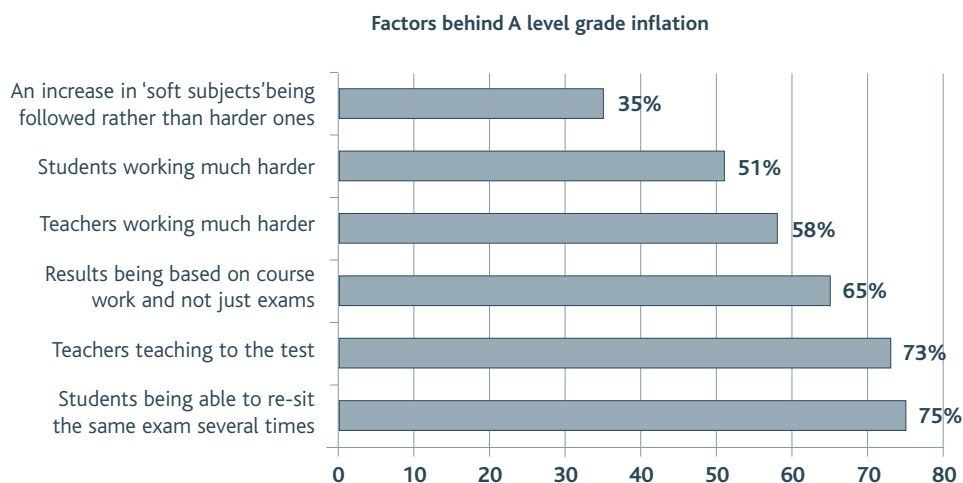


Aggregate percentage score for each quality

What factors lie behind this perception of A levels, and its increasing disconnect from university style learning? The survey explored the subject of grade inflation, which suggests that 'teaching to the test' is a key factor, coupled with re-sitting exams

A LEVEL GRADE INFLATION

One in twenty A level passes is now an A grade mark. University admissions officers acknowledge the hard work of students and teachers which lies behind this statistic. They agree that it is the result of harder, more focused work as the following chart shows. However, university admissions officers believe that the result of this focused effort is that teachers are now teaching to the test. This would explain why a lack of independent thinking and creativity is a further charge made against A levels.



Q. How strongly do you feel that the increase in the proportion of students achieving higher grades at A level is a result of any of the following factors? Agree or strongly agree only.

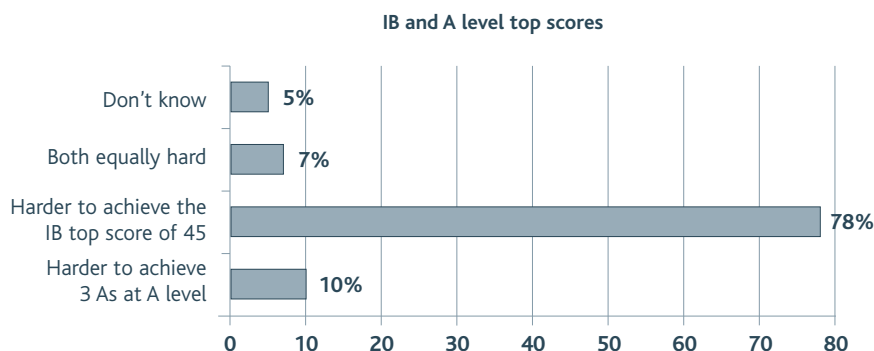
The net effect – teaching to the test, harder work from both teachers and students, plus a variety of other factors cited here including re-sitting exams and greater proportion of course work rather than exams – inevitably leads to grades improving, or 'grade inflation'.

This is not to say that university admissions officers believe A levels should be abolished. Far from it – 75 per cent do not want to see the exam phased out and 63 per cent believe the media is unfairly portraying the qualification.

But clearly a solution or cessation of the pressure which leads to teaching to the test and the ability to re-sit exams needs to be found so that the best quality of A levels – in depth subject knowledge – can be complemented by creative teaching and learning.

IB DIPLOMA PROGRAMME

Respondents to this survey consider the IB Diploma to be a much more challenging qualification than A levels.



Q. Which would you say is harder to achieve, 3 As at A level or the top score of 45 in the IB Diploma?

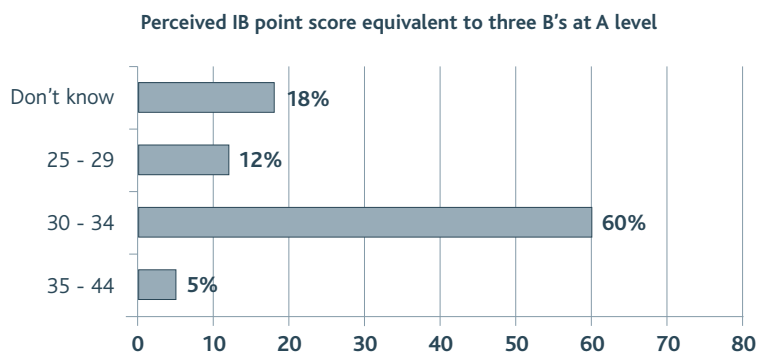
UNDERSTANDING THE IB DIPLOMA DIFFERENCE

It is easy to see why admissions officers, in common with many academics, understand that it is harder to achieve the top IB score of 45 than the top score in three A levels. Less than one per cent of the IB Diploma cohort worldwide achieved the top score of 45 in 2008.

The grading system for the IB Diploma is criterion based, with results determined by performance against set standards defined in a rubric, not by each student's position in the overall rank order as is the case for A levels.

There is evidence in this survey however that admissions officers do not understand the level of skills and learning required to achieve grades at the middle and lower end of the IB Diploma pass score.

As the following chart shows, most admissions officers believe 3 Bs at A level is equivalent to between 30 – 34 points at IB, which is significantly different (higher) than the comparative grades suggested by UCAS.



Q. What would you say is the equivalent of three Bs at A level in terms of an IB Diploma score?

The UCAS tariff system awards the following points for the A level and the IB:

- One grade B at A level = 100 points; three Bs at A level = 300 points
- Score 24 at IB Diploma = 280 points
- Score 32 at IB Diploma = 466 points

To achieve an IB Diploma score above 24 which is the pass score, an IB student must engage in the study of six subjects, take part in a range of other activities and write a 4,000 word independent study. To achieve 3 Bs at A level a student must study just three subjects and achieve a score of between 40 – 60 per cent in each.

Admissions officers may well refer to the official UCAS tariff before making specific offers to students, but the figures from this survey show that their personally held view demands substantially higher grades for an IB Diploma student than for an A level student.

The majority of respondents say they feel 3 Bs at A level is equivalent to 32 points in the IB Diploma, whereas the UCAS classification equates this to 466 points, equal to 4 Bs.

IMPROVING 16 – 19 TEACHING AND LEARNING QUALITY

Respondents to this survey recognise that teachers in post-16 education in the UK are under intense pressure, and feel that this is threatening the quality of teaching available to students, with skills such as creativity being lost in the process.

Those who feel there is a threat to the quality of teaching in post-16 education – and this is the majority, 82 per cent – place the blame squarely on the shoulders of government, through the volume of new initiatives, league tables and funding issues.

Factors potentially threatening post-16 teaching quality	Yes %
The volume of government initiatives in teaching methodology or approaches	82
Teaching to the test	78
School league tables and targets putting pressure on students and teachers to achieve higher grades	73
The funding situation in the FE sector	68
The inflexibility of curricula and restrictions on teachers' creativity	67
A decline in standards of behaviour among school and college students	53
Increasing the school leaving age to 18	40
A decline in the ability of school and college students to concentrate for long periods	35
The introduction of the new Diplomas	18
There is no threat to the quality of post 16 education in terms of preparation for university learning	15

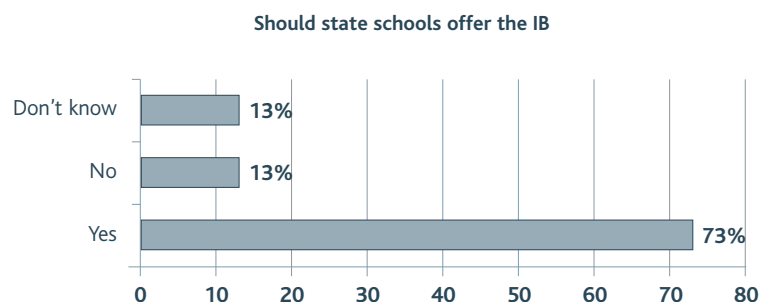
Q. Which if any of the following factors do you think are a threat to the quality of post 16 teaching quality in terms of preparation for university learning?

There is clearly a desire from university admissions officers to see more creative approaches to teaching and learning, and greater freedom for teachers from targets and restrictive curricula.

There is some support for the view that students themselves are threatening the quality of post-16 education, with 53 per cent of admissions officers believing that declining standards of behaviour among students is threatening the quality of teaching for 16 – 19 year olds. This is coupled with a significant proportion of respondents who feel that increasing the school leaving age to 18 poses a threat to teaching quality. How will compulsory education for disinterested youngsters affect those who genuinely want to learn and progress to education beyond school, and who currently benefit from smaller classes with their motivated peers?

INTRODUCTION OF THE IB

Almost three quarters of respondents in this study would like to see the IB offered in state schools.



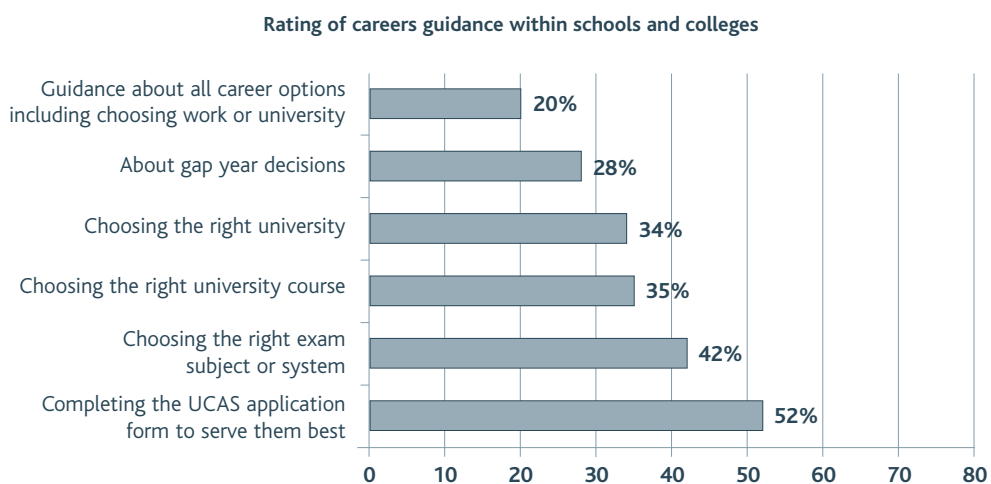
Q. Would you like to see more state schools offering the IB as an exam choice?

Based on the requirement of the IB Diploma programme as described above, this would be a challenge for many schools, but one which should be seized where possible. In the past year, 59 schools in the UK have adopted the Diploma programme²; it requires a complete change in the approach to teaching and learning in much the same way as the new Diplomas have called for intense planning and retraining where they are being introduced. The additional challenge for many schools is how to genuinely incorporate the international, global perspective ethos of the IB at post-16 study into a system built on an often UK-centric primary or middle years education.

ACCESS TO GOOD ADVICE ABOUT EXAM AND UNIVERSITY CHOICES

How can parents or students choose the right school or university course from the increasing choice available to them?

Admissions officers who took part in this survey do not seem to feel that the quality of advice available in schools and colleges is consistently of a very high standard, either in guiding options post-16, or choices at university.



Q. How highly would you rate the quality of careers guidance given within schools and colleges in each of the following respects as they relate to university choices?

Admissions officers give the lowest score to the quality of careers guidance relating to the basic choice between work or higher education. This could suggest that respondents think some students would be better off commencing paid work rather than going to university. Equally it could mean admissions officers feel that people who would benefit from higher education are being advised to start work, and are missing out on the benefits of university learning. This is an area which would merit further investigation.

What is clear from this research is that careers guidance in schools and colleges is not rated very highly by admissions officers, with most respondents rating the quality of careers advice in every area as "neither good nor bad" which could perhaps be interpreted as "indifferent."

The only area in which a majority of university admissions officers feel school and college students receive good quality of careers advice is in the actual completion of the UCAS form.

However, the decisions which precede completing an application form – which university and which university course to select – are so very integral to the happiness and success of undergraduates that potentially poor quality advice is cause for concern.

Careers guidance has long been described as a Cinderella service. With the increasing cost or debt required to achieve a first degree, coupled with increasing concern over rising university drop out rates, parents and students should ensure they secure the best possible advice and guidance about the choices available to them before making any decisions.

METHODOLOGY

This research project was devised and delivered by the Twelve Consultancy (MMRS, PRCA) on behalf of ACS International Schools. The survey is based on telephone interviews with 60 university admissions officers working in a range of different university types across the UK. The telephone interviews were conducted by Stormark (DMA, TPS) between 20th April and 8th May 2009. All research was conducted according to the Market Research Society Code of Conduct.

There are currently 109 universities in the UK. There are also 169 Higher Education Institutions giving a total of 278 degree awarding institutions³.

The 60 admissions personnel who took part in this survey were drawn from all different HEI types across the UK as described below.

Survey respondents, regional distribution

	n.	%
England	46	77
Scotland	7	12
Wales	5	8
Northern Ireland	2	3
Total	60	100

Survey respondents, institution type

	n.	%
Pre 1992 Universities	21	35
Post 1992 Universities	21	35
Other HEI	18	30
Total	60	100

The average number of applications processed by respondents' offices each year is 14,308.

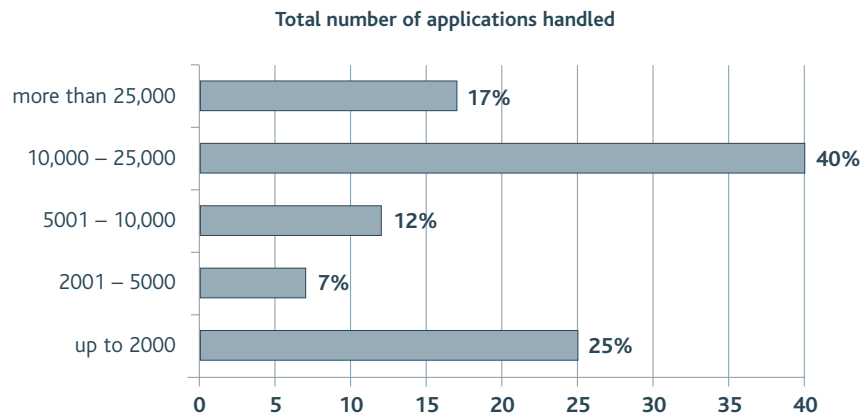
STUDENT NUMBERS

In the academic year to September 2008 there were 582,657 applicants for places at UK universities and 451,871 students were accepted on to courses⁴.

The admissions officers who took part in this survey manage departments which receive an average of 14,000 applications in a typical year. This average figure includes departments in the largest universities which handle more than 25,000 applications a year and those from smaller universities or specialist colleges handling around 2,000 applications a year.

³ UUK August 2008

⁴ UUK 2009



Q. In the course of one academic year, about how many undergraduate applications does your office handle?

The majority of respondents to this survey, 40 per cent, are managing departments which handle between 10,000 and 25,000 student applications a year.

Our sample of 60 admissions officers is drawn from three different higher education institute (HEI) types:

- 21 pre-1992 universities including Russell Group universities and respondents from Oxbridge colleges.
- 26 post-1992 universities including many universities from the 1994 Group.
- 13 'other' types of HEIs including agricultural colleges, music colleges and colleges of specialist subjects such as pharmacy where degree level study can be carried out.

Across these three groups, some difference in admission department sizes is to be expected. While respondents from pre and post 1992 institutions work in departments with a similarly high volume of applicants, 'other HEIs' handle a smaller number of applicants in a typical year.

	Average department number of undergraduate applications per annum
Pre-1992 Universities	21
Post-1992 Universiteis	21
Other HEI	18

Just over half the admissions officers in this year's survey handle applications from students who hold the International Baccalaureate (IB) with officers most typically seeing up to 50 IB qualified applicants a year.



ACS INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS

Cobham Egham Hillingdon

ACS International Schools enrolls more than 2,500 students aged between 2 and 18, from over 70 nationalities, at three London area campuses in England. The schools are non-sectarian and co-educational, with both day and boarding available. Based on international and American research, principles, and educational practices, ACS is committed to maintaining the highest standards of scholarship and citizenship.

Our academic programme

All ACS campuses are International Baccalaureate (IB) World Schools, offering the IB Diploma Programme (IBDP). In addition, ACS Egham is one of only three schools in the UK to also offer the IB Middle Years Programme (IBMYP), and the IB Primary Years Programme (IBPYP). ACS Hillingdon is currently a candidate school for the IBMYP.

All ACS campuses offer an American High School Diploma, with ACS Cobham and ACS Hillingdon also teaching prestigious Advanced Placement (AP) courses.

ACS graduates attend leading universities around the world including: Cambridge, Imperial College London, London School of Economics, and Oxford in the UK; Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, and Yale in the US; and McGill, Stockholm School of Economics, University of Oslo, Delft University of Technology, University of Tokyo, and Keio from the rest of the world.

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