



ACS INTERNATIONAL  
SCHOOLS

*Cobham Egham Hillingdon*

London, England

## PATHS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Finding your way through the qualifications maze

An ACS International Schools special report

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## Foreword

The post 16 qualification landscape looks very different a year on from our last report, with the first students undertaking the new Diplomas and the Cambridge Pre-U in September 2008. The A level qualification is also changing with the introduction of an A\* grade from September 2010, whilst the International Baccalaureate (IB) continues to go from strength to strength. With so much choice available in terms of post 16 qualifications, it is more essential than ever for all those who are involved in shaping, delivering or participating in post 16 studies, to understand the views of university officers.

This, our third annual survey explores how university and college admissions officers view the new exam systems being introduced, and how perceptions are changing towards the established qualifications of A levels and the IB. It also explores the other criteria admissions officers look for in student applicants - over and above their exam qualifications - a subject of considerable importance to students applying to the most competitive courses and universities.

Whilst this year's survey finds admissions officers certainly appreciating some of the long term benefits of a wider range of qualifications, they are at odds with some aspects of policymakers' thinking in Britain. Admissions officers remain supportive of A levels and the majority do not want to see them phased out, whereas the messages from government regarding their future are not clear.

The IB is very strongly supported, believed to develop not just the academic qualities needed to succeed at university, but the skills to equip students to thrive in life. The IB is also considered the best qualification for helping young people to study or work internationally.

Considering new qualifications, the Pre-U appears to some admissions personnel to offer a different set of values to other qualifications, while the core values and approach of the new Diplomas are well regarded, perceived in many cases to develop a superior range of values than A levels.

ACS International Schools has offered the IB education programme for 28 years and this survey is designed, in part, to assess its qualities alongside other qualifications through the eyes of university and college admissions officers – a group of people uniquely placed to comment on different education qualifications and the qualities they nurture in young people.

In today's changing education climate it is more vital than ever that students, parents and policymakers are able to assess the differences between qualifications in order to make the choices that are right for them. This report provides information and answers to help inform this decision making process.

*Fergus Rose, ACS International Schools*

## Summary of Findings

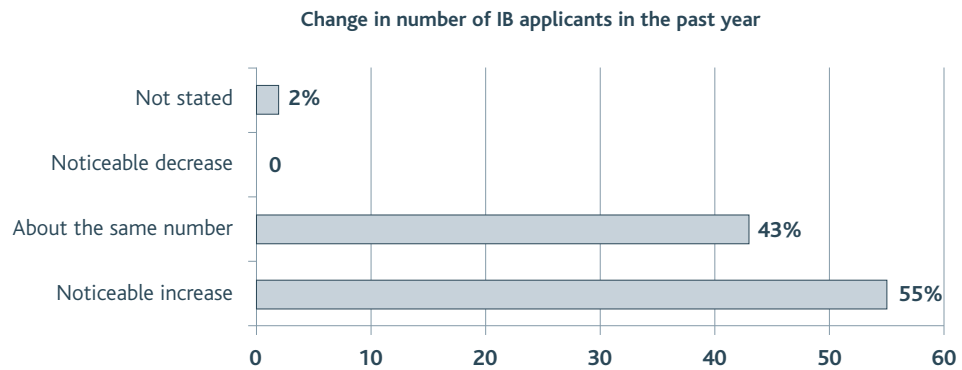
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- The 51 admissions officers who took part in this year's survey manage departments which handle on average 14,308 university applications every year. All have considerable experience of assessing candidates with the IB qualification.
- Over half of the respondents reported a noticeable increase in the number of IB applications received in the past year.
- Applicants from across the world are applying to study in the UK; a quarter of admissions officers handle over 500 applications from people whose post 16 qualifications are from other European countries apart from the UK.
- The IB is the most highly rated post 16 qualification available to UK students in terms of securing international university placement.
- The IB is also the most highly rated UK qualification scored against a range of other qualities. 92 per cent of admissions officers believe it 'encourages independent inquiry', and 88 per cent say it helps students 'develop an ability to cope with pressure' and 'maintain an open mind'.
- While the IB is most highly rated qualification all round, admissions officers value other qualifications available to UK sixth form students, recognise that each has a slightly different focus, and do not share in the intense criticism surrounding new and existing qualifications being voiced in the media.
- The majority of admissions officers, 63 per cent, believe that A levels should not be phased out at all.
- Just over half of admissions officers still feel that the media is unfairly portraying A levels, although this figure has declined slightly over the past three years.
- 86 per cent of admissions officers feel that the core values of A levels are 'developing in depth subject expertise', and 71 per cent agree that they 'develop an ability to cope with pressure'.
- Core values of the new Diplomas are 'developing self management skills' and 'nurturing communication skills' – 69 per cent of admissions officers agree with those statements – and 63 per cent say that they 'encourage independent inquiry'.
- A quarter of admissions officers feel that the Pre-U offers a 'very different set of values to A levels, the IB and new Diplomas'.
- Just over half, 57 per cent, of admissions officers believe that the impact of more exam choices will be better for our society in the long run; 53 per cent however, also believe that 'this generation is being treated like guinea pigs'.
- More admissions officers cite the IB as the best preparation to thrive at university than all other qualifications combined. After academic qualifications, admissions officers look for an indication of this quality – the ability to thrive at university – above other more 'traditional' CV offerings such as work experience or participation in sports.
- 92 per cent of admissions officers look for 'creative thinking' and 'a commitment to thrive at university' in addition to academic qualifications. This is followed by 'soft skills', 88 per cent; and work experience, 86 percent.
- The IB is considered to provide the best preparation to thrive at university of all the main sixth form exam choices on offer in the UK. Over a third, 35 per cent, of admissions officers believe the IB provides the best preparation to thrive at university, compared to 18 per cent who cited A levels, eight per cent who cited the Pre-U, and six per cent who cited the new Diplomas.
- Admissions officers see a change and polarisation in attitude among university applicants with 71 per cent seeing more applications from people who are very career and work focused and just over a fifth, 22 per cent, seeing an increase in applications from people they believe will go on to become 'graduate divas'.
- The decline in students applying for STEM subjects, (science, technology, engineering and maths) continues to be a subject of intense concern to admissions officers.
- Increasing the school leaving age as way to encourage a wider group of people to engage and thrive at university continues to have a lukewarm appeal to admissions officers. Just over a quarter, 27 per cent consider it to be an effective approach.
- Over two thirds of admissions officers, 68 per cent, believe that more state schools and colleges offering the IB would be effective in encouraging a wider group of people to engage and thrive in higher education.

- Admissions officers are largely supportive of the diversity of exams on offer and the view that 'one size fits all' does not feature; the new Diplomas are viewed by a majority as a positive step forward. The positive response to the range of exam choices on offer suggests that an applicant would not be at a disadvantage applying to a university with a new Diploma.
- However, despite support for greater exam diversity there is concern that the impact of more exam choice has resulted in the current generation of applicants being 'treated like guinea pigs'.
- This year's survey has shown stronger support for the IB than in previous years. The qualification is particularly valued for the qualities which it develops in its students including creative thinking, team working and presentation skills. Admissions officers also believe that students with the IB qualification are better prepared to thrive at university.
- Admissions officers recognise that their universities compete internationally for students (as well as staff and research funding), and believe that the IB is the best preparation for international study or an international career.
- Considering the core values or qualities of each exam system – such as encouraging creativity, developing self management skills and nurturing an open mind – the IB is rated ahead of A levels and the Diplomas in every respect apart from 'developing in depth subject expertise' where A levels score more highly.
- Today's students are increasingly career focused, a significant new phenomena observed by admissions officers in this survey which highlights the growing pressure on students to choose and compete for the right course at university.
- While unsure at this stage what impact new qualifications such as the Diploma and the Cambridge Pre-U will have, admissions officers are optimistic on the whole and see positive aspects to the new qualifications. A quarter believe the Pre-U offers a very different set of values to A levels and the IB; the new Diploma is believed to develop the values of communication, citizenship, an open mind and business skills as much or more than A levels.
- The current proposal to increase the school leaving age to 18 has been met with indifference rather than support by admissions officers, in terms of its potential to encourage a wider group of people to engage and thrive at university.

# 1. IB Applicants

## 1.1 WHAT CHANGE, IF ANY, HAVE YOU SEEN JUST IN THE PAST YEAR IN THE NUMBER OF UK STUDENTS OFFERING THE IB DIPLOMA? HAVE YOU SEEN A....



On the whole respondents have reported a noticeable increase in the number of applicants offering the IB, with 55 per cent highlighting a noticeable increase and 43 per cent reporting about the same number of IB applicants this year compared to last year.

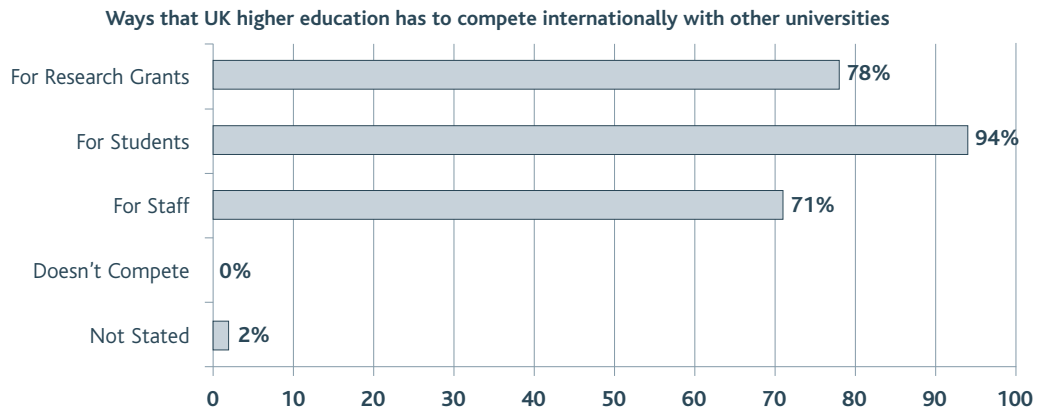
None of the respondents identified a decrease in the number of IB applicants.

In each year of the ACS survey, an increase in the number of IB applicants has been noted. In 2005 almost three quarters, 71 per cent of admissions officer reported a 'slight increase' in IB numbers. This growth has been sustained.

There are now 131 schools in the UK offering the IB Diploma, a substantial increase on the 100 schools that offered the IB Diploma just a year ago (Source: International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO)).

## 2. Competing Internationally

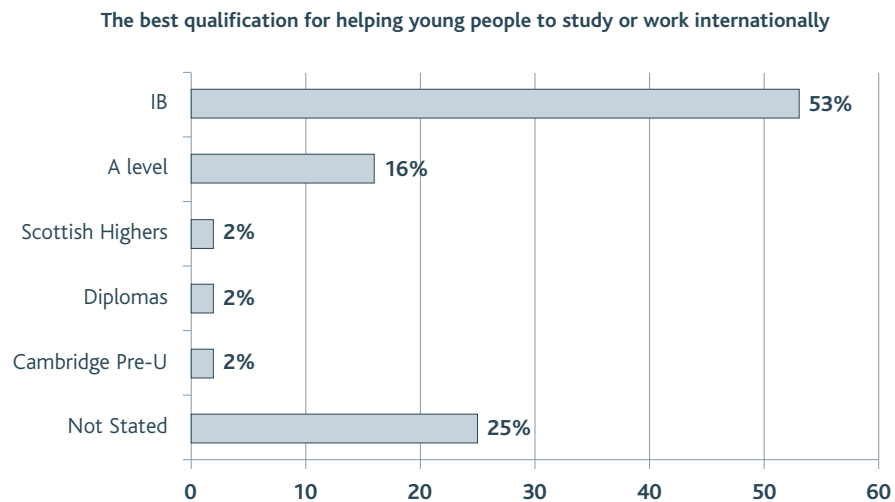
### 2.1 IN WHICH, IF ANY, OF THE FOLLOWING WAYS DO YOU THINK UK HIGHER EDUCATION HAS TO COMPETE INTERNATIONALLY WITH OTHER UNIVERSITIES?



These results show that respondents are very conscious that UK higher education has to compete internationally with other universities; every respondent reported that their university has to compete internationally in one way or another.

A large proportion of respondents, 94 per cent, feel that UK higher education has to compete internationally with other universities for students in particular. This emphasises the volume of students that UK higher education receives or hopes to receive from abroad.

### 2.2 WHICH, IF ANY, OF THE FOLLOWING QUALIFICATIONS DO YOU THINK IS THE BEST ONE FOR HELPING YOUNG PEOPLE TO STUDY OR WORK INTERNATIONALLY?

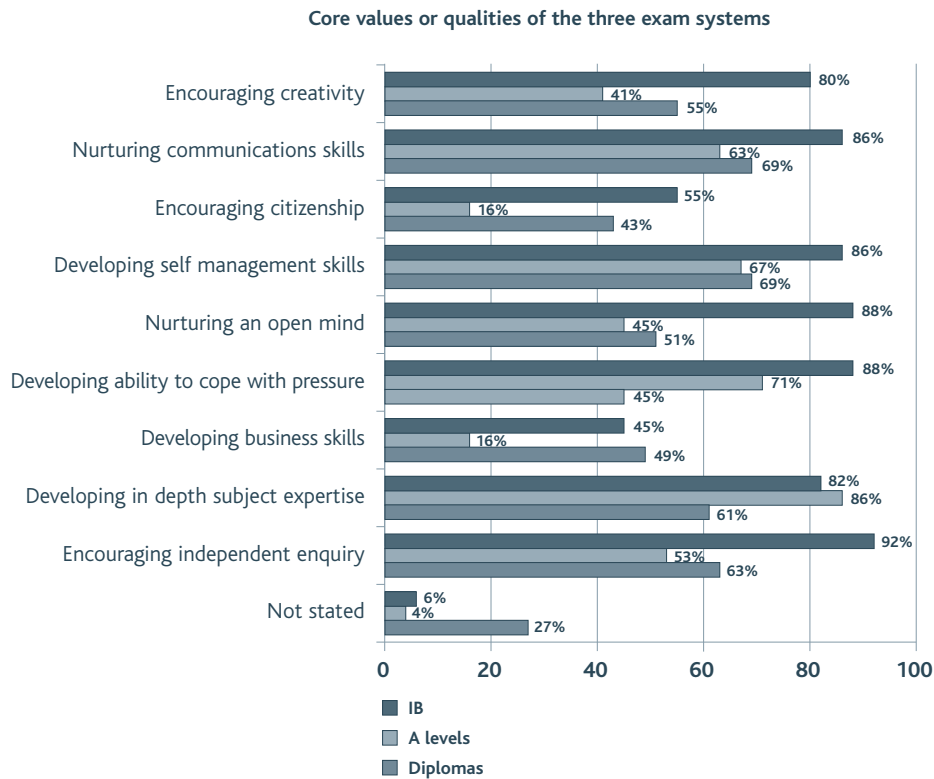


Over half of the respondents, 53 per cent, felt that the IB is the best qualification for helping young people to study or work internationally. The IB was designed to be an internationally available and recognised qualification, and is now offered in 128 countries across the world (source: International Baccalaureate Organisation, IBO).

A quarter of respondents did not provide an answer to this question. Throughout the survey we see that admissions officers do not offer views where they feel unable to comment. The proportion of respondents who answer each question in this way is presented to provide a balanced picture of results.

### 3. Education Values of Different Systems

#### 3.1 WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE THE CORE VALUES OR QUALITIES WHICH THE THREE EXAM SYSTEMS – A LEVELS, IB AND THE NEW DIPLOMAS – DEVELOP IN STUDENTS?



The IB is believed to develop more values, more effectively than A levels. Its core values rate consistently higher with 92 per cent emphasising its ability to 'encourage independent inquiry' and 88 per cent highlighting that it both 'nurtures an open mind' and 'develops ability to cope under pressure'.

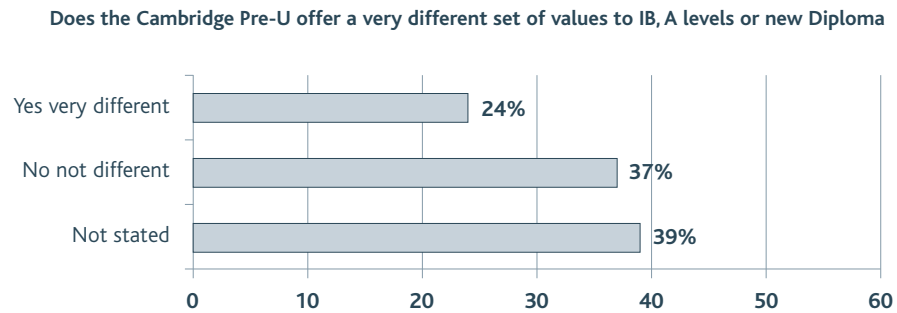
A levels were rated highly as developing in depth subject expertise, with 86 per cent of respondents identifying this as the key value of the A level qualification. However on the whole, this is the only value that respondents felt the A level offers to a greater extent than the other two qualifications, with the IB and the new Diploma overtaking A levels in majority of the categories.

Respondents considered the new Diplomas to offer students more in terms of 'nurturing communications skills' and 'developing self management skills', with 69 per cent highlighting both of these values. The new Diploma was rated as the best qualification for developing business skills, with 49 per cent highlighting this quality.

Over a quarter of respondents refused to comment on the new Diploma's core values, compared to six per cent and four per cent refusing to comment on the IB and A levels respectively. However, additional comments provided by respondents suggest that admissions officers continue to hold a positive perception of the new Diplomas, whilst emphasising that opinion is not yet based on experience.

## 4. Impact of Changes

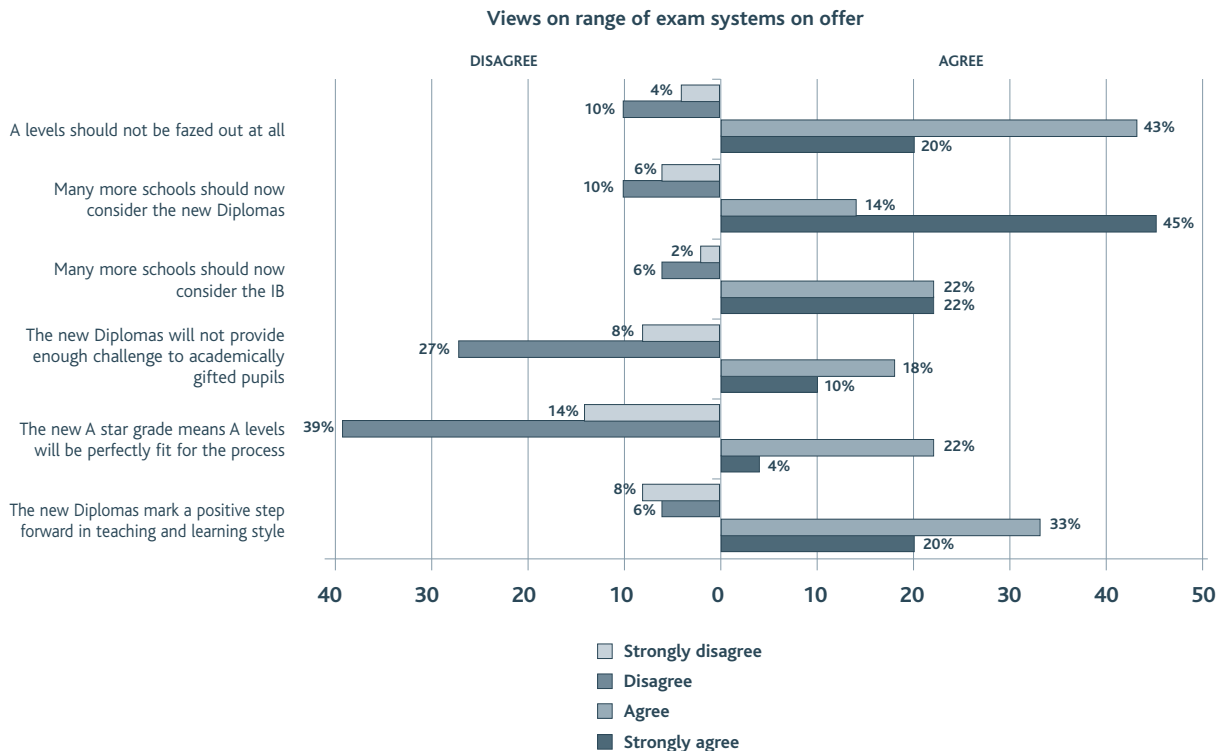
### 4.1 DO YOU FEEL THE CAMBRIDGE PRE-U OFFERS A VERY DIFFERENT SET OF VALUES TO THESE THREE: A LEVELS, IB OR NEW DIPLOMA?



The majority of respondents, 39 per cent, preferred not to answer this question commenting that, as with the new Diploma, they felt that they did not have sufficient experience on which to base a judgement.

Of those who did offer a response, 37 per cent feel that the Cambridge Pre-U does not offer a different set of values to A levels, the IB or the Diploma.

### 4.2 HOW STRONGLY DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS ABOUT POST 16 EXAMS IN THE UK?

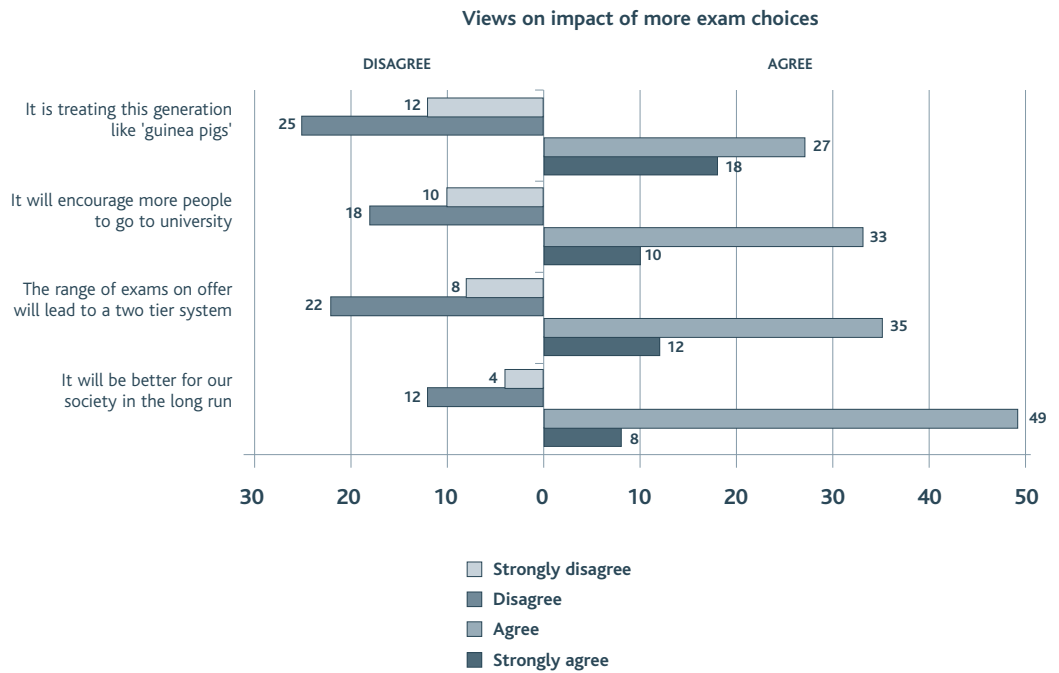


Admissions officers largely support the emerging diversity in the UK exam system: 59 per cent believe that 'many more schools should now consider the new Diplomas' while 44 per cent believe that 'more schools should now consider the IB'.

The most widely supported view among respondents is that 'A levels should not be phased out at all'. A total of 63 per cent agreed with this statement, to varying degrees. This suggests that, in spite of the criticism faced by A levels, the qualification is still held in high regard by admissions officers.

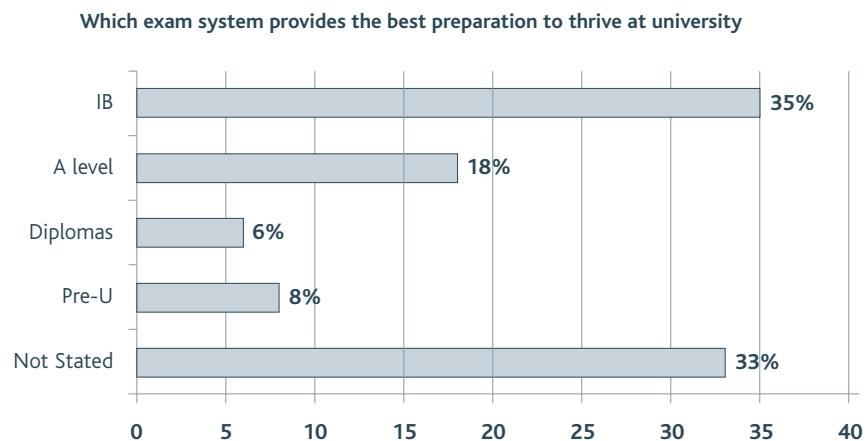
Although A levels are supported by the majority, there is some criticism of the new A level A star grade, which will be introduced from September 2010. Just over half, 53 per cent of respondents, do not feel that the A star grade will make A levels perfectly fit for purpose.

**4.3 HOW STRONGLY DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS ABOUT THE POTENTIAL IMPACT OF MORE EXAM CHOICES, IN PARTICULAR A LEVELS, THE IB AND NEW DIPLOMAS, BEING AVAILABLE IN ENGLAND AND WALES?**



The answers to this question reiterate the view that university admissions officers support the evolution in the UK exam system. The majority of respondents feel that the range of exam systems on offer will be better for our society in the long run.

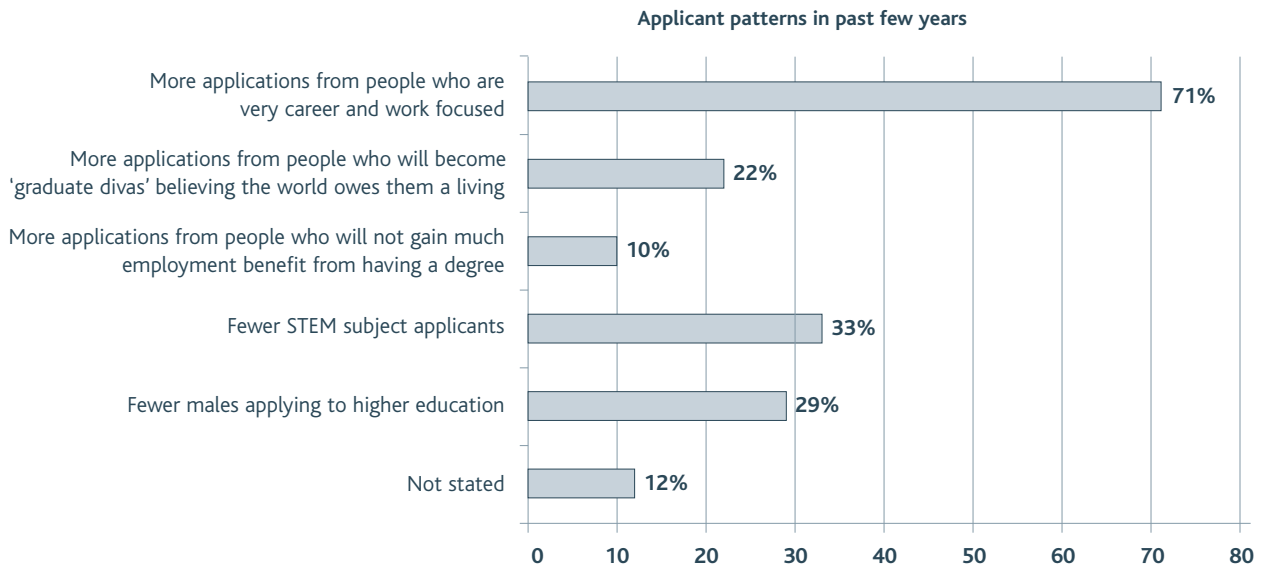
**4.4 WHICH IF ANY OF THE FOLLOWING EXAM SYSTEMS DO YOU THINK PROVIDES THE BEST PREPARATION TO THRIVE AT UNIVERSITY?**



The IB is considered the best preparation to thrive at university, with almost exactly double the rating of A levels. Despite this, respondents did not show negativity towards the Pre-U or the new Diploma in their comments, but simply based judgement on the qualifications of which they have more experience.

## 5. Applicant Patterns

### 5.1 WHICH, IF ANY, OF THE FOLLOWING POSSIBLE APPLICANT PATTERNS HAVE YOU SEEN HAPPENING IN THE PAST FEW YEARS?



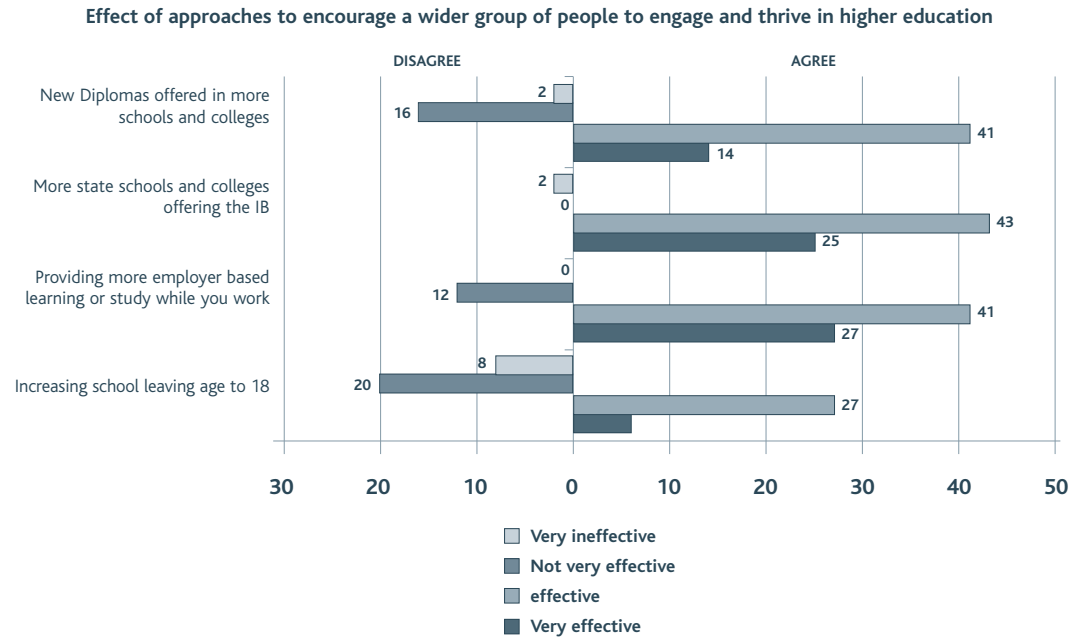
The answers to this question suggest that there is a polarisation of student applicant types, with the majority being extremely hard working, career focused individuals. A determination to succeed and reap a reward from a significant financial investment is perhaps a new phenomenon in the UK HE scene. Admission officers believe it is a good thing, which will have a positive impact on the future of university education.

The opposite group of 'graduate divas' who believe the world owes them a living is a minority, albeit quite a sizeable one among student applicants, observed by one in five admission officers.

Fewer STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) applicants continue to be noted among admissions officers, as it was in last year's survey, and is a subject which raises serious concerns for the future.

## 6. Widening Participation

### 6.1 HOW EFFECTIVE DO YOU THINK EACH OF THE FOLLOWING APPROACHES WOULD BE IN ENCOURAGING A WIDER GROUP OF PEOPLE TO ENGAGE AND THRIVE IN HIGHER EDUCATION?

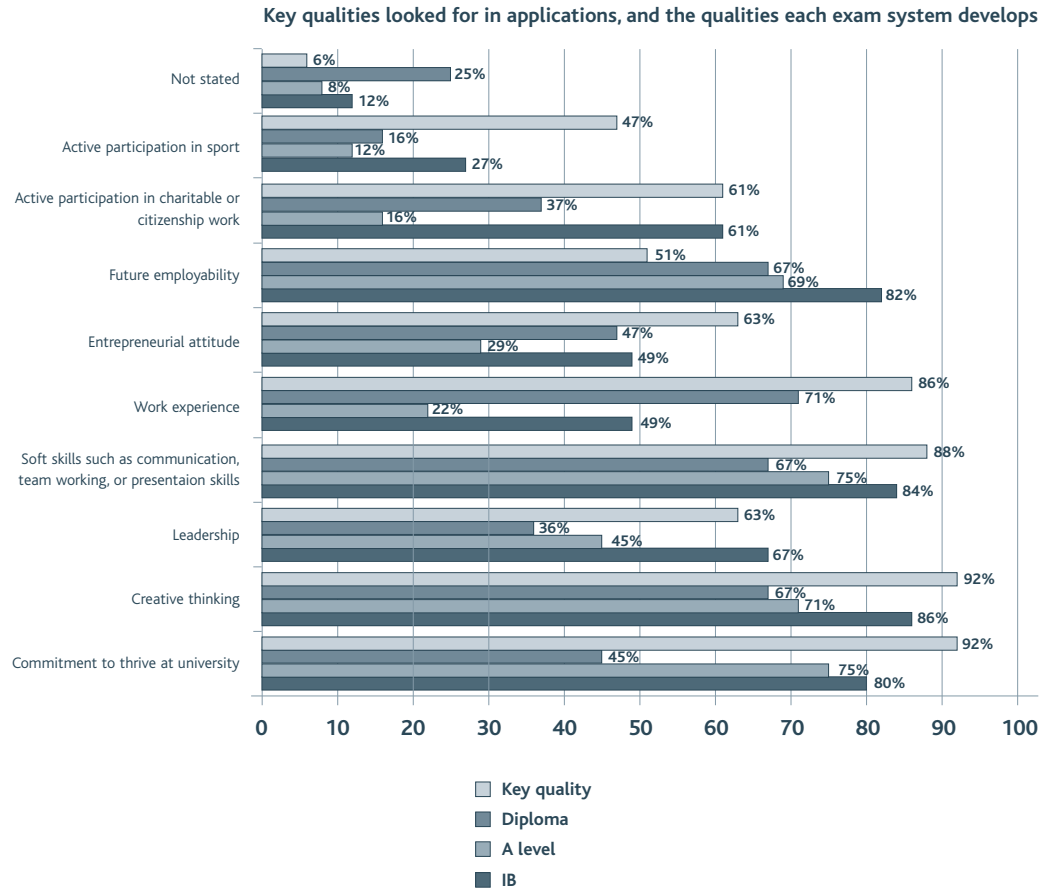


The most effective approaches in encouraging a wider group of people to engage and thrive in higher education are considered to be both 'more state schools and colleges offering the International Baccalaureate' and 'providing more employer based learning or study while you work', with 68 per cent of respondents in each case highlighting these.

Respondents consider the most ineffective approach in encouraging widening participation at university to be 'increasing the school leaving age to 18', with over a quarter identifying this – the highest figure with regard to ineffective approaches.

## 7. Applying to University

### 7.1 WHICH, IF ANY, OF THE FOLLOWING SIGNS DO YOU LOOK OUT FOR IN STUDENT APPLICATIONS TO YOUR UNIVERSITY, IN ADDITION TO EDUCATION QUALIFICATIONS, AND WHICH OF THESE DO YOU THINK THE THREE EXAM SYSTEMS – A LEVELS, IB AND THE NEW DIPLOMAS – ENCOURAGE MOST IN STUDENTS



The main indicator for admissions officers concerning which students to accept on a university course is of course their academic qualifications. However with an increasing number of students achieving the top grades, as well as a plethora of different qualifications on offer, admissions officers are increasingly looking to other factors in order to differentiate candidates. These factors should be of intense interest to students, parents and teachers who are considering how to win a place on the most competitive courses and the most competitive universities, as well as to policymakers.

Respondents were almost unanimous that 'commitment to thrive at university' and 'creative thinking' were the two most important secondary factors in influencing applications, with 92 per cent of respondents looking for these signs in student applications.

The main factor that respondents felt the IB encourages in students was creative thinking, also a main indicator in identifying which students to accept on a university course, with 86 per cent of respondents highlighting this as a key factor for the IB. Respondents identified work experience as the main factor encouraged by the new Diplomas, with 71 per cent identifying this factor. Three quarters of respondents considered A levels to encourage students' 'commitment to thrive at university and 'soft skills'.

On the whole all three of the exam systems perform well in the four top additional factors that admission officers look for in applications 'commitment to thrive at university', 'creative thinking', 'soft skills and 'work experience'.

## 8. Further Comments

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At the close of the survey respondents were given an opportunity to express any further views they held about exam systems. This year just over half the respondents accepted. In previous years there have been very few additional comments at this point.

We feel that the range of views expressed illustrates the real concerns of admissions officers at this moment in time. Whilst views are varied, most expressed strong support for the IB, a willingness for the Diploma to work and above all else a concern for the students' well being.

*"Students should receive good advice and guidance at an early stage as to the best qualification for their intended career path."*

*"Strongly support IB and Cambridge Pre-U looks interesting. However, introduction of new Diploma could lead to a two tier system."*

*"It would be good to see IB rolled out further and run in tandem with A level. A levels need to recover creative thinking element and skills needed for university study."*

*"Clarity is needed for new Diploma to ensure parents and pupils understand aims and expectations of qualifications."*

*"Very difficult times. Difficult decisions are having to be made by year 11 pupils who need all the information available."*

*"Worried about the confusion of qualifications and the lack of information and guidance available."*

*"A level and IB are proving comparable in progression. New Diploma should be good for participation in HE."*

*"IB's are very good and I would like to see more from state schools. For international applications it is the only comparison."*

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 51 university admissions officers working in a range of different university types across the UK. The telephone interviews were conducted by Stormark (DMA, TPS) between 15th April 2008 and 6th May 2008. All research was conducted according to the Market Research Society Code of Conduct.

There are currently 106 universities in the UK. There are also 168 Higher Education Institutions giving a total of 274 degree awarding institutions (as of August 2007).

The 51 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 (excl. London)	37	72
Scotland	5	10
Wales	2	4
Northern Ireland	0	0
London	7	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>100</b>

### Survey respondents, university institution type

	n.	%
Pre 1992 Universities	26	51
Post 1992 Universiteis	15	29
Other	10	20
<b>Total</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>100</b>

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





# ACS INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS

*Cobham Egham Hillingdon*

ACS International Schools enrolls a total of 2,600 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).

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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