



**ACS** INTERNATIONAL  
**SCHOOLS**

*Cobham Egham Hillingdon*

London, England

## IB or not IB

How university admissions personnel perceive the International Baccalaureate (IB)  
as a preparation for higher education and working life

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## Foreword

As a leading international school with students going on to attend universities all over the world, the provision of an education that combines a strong academic base, an emphasis on personal development and a global perspective, has always been at the heart of ACS International Schools.

The International Baccalaureate (IB), which provides in depth specialisation within a broad based programme, meets our very exacting demands. In recent years, we have seen the IB grow in popularity beyond the international community and there now appears to be widespread recognition of the IB as a 'platinum standard' qualification offering a wide breadth of subjects which students enjoy and at which they can excel.

Here in the UK, interest in the IB has been heightened by the regular debate accompanying A level results when they are published each year. The discussion, centred around the perceived narrow field of study; the challenges of 'grade inflation' and concerns over a curriculum which many believe lacks relevance to the modern world, regularly turns to the alternatives, such as the IB.

Supporters of the IB claim the broad based study, together with student acquired skills of independent thinking and self management can give students the tools they need to best equip themselves as they prepare for higher education and work in later life. Parallels are also drawn between the IB and the approach to learning outlined in the Tomlinson Report which suggested the introduction of a diploma style qualification as the way forward in the UK.

A recent announcement from UCAS in the UK, presenting how its points tariff can be applied to IB results, has also moved the debate forward with the IB emerging stronger than ever – an IB Diploma score of 35 points (only a little above the worldwide IB average score) seemingly equating to 4½ A grades at A level.

But what aspects of the IB are really appealing to UK universities and how does the qualification really compare to A levels for students seeking admission to these institutions?

Earlier this year, ACS International Schools commissioned telephone research amongst managers and officers in central admissions departments across Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the UK. The research set out to explore the perceptions of the IB and the British A level system in the context of preparation for university and the workplace: how university admissions personnel view the qualification and how it really compares as an entry qualification to higher education? What qualities are universities looking for nowadays in their applicants and are IB graduates more likely to offer these?

This report presents the findings of our research and it makes fascinating reading for anyone involved in preparing young people for higher education and beyond.

*Fergus Rose, ACS International Schools*

- UK Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) admissions personnel believe the IB equips its students with the creativity and independence to be successful both at university and in later life.
- More admissions personnel cite the IB as a better preparation for university life than A levels, claiming that the IB provides better preparation for university learning, prepares its students better for creative thinking, independent learning and self management than A levels.
- Three quarters, 75 per cent, of admission personnel are expecting to see an increase in the number of UK applicants presenting the IB Diploma rather than A levels.
- All university admissions personnel involved in the survey had received applications in the past academic year from students qualified with the IB Diploma; and the vast majority claim they are receiving more applications from IB students than in previous years and expect this number to increase still further in the future.
- Beyond the traditional measures of academic achievement and qualifications, admissions personnel are more likely to look for work related skills than sporting skills when processing applications, and acknowledge that employability is now a key part of the value provided to students of university life.
- A third of university admission personnel believe that the increase in the IB is being driven by a loss of confidence in the A level system; 68 per cent of admissions personnel agree that this may be a reason why schools are offering the IB instead of, or as well as A levels.
- Admissions personnel believe that students are working harder, and that teaching is more focussed on exam success and less on other learning.
- Admissions personnel believe that schools are attracted to the IB qualification because of the mix of subjects it offers, its rigorous academic background, the base and tools it gives for university style learning and the fact that it is not a national or country specific qualification.
- There is recognition that the increasing popularity of the IB may also be linked to growing globalisation and the need for cultural diversity and awareness.
- Despite seeing the IB as a very valuable qualification, there remains support for the A level system and the work which students put in; depth of study is the main benefit which admissions personnel feel students gain from A level study.
- The majority of respondents, 67 per cent, feel the media is unfairly portraying the A level system.
- Seven in ten admissions personnel do not think that schools and universities should develop their own exams to identify the best students.

Widening diversity targets, aiming for fifty per cent of UK school leavers to attend university, are encouraging more and more young people to continue to higher education. As a result, there is an increasing need for students to distinguish themselves to gain entry to university.

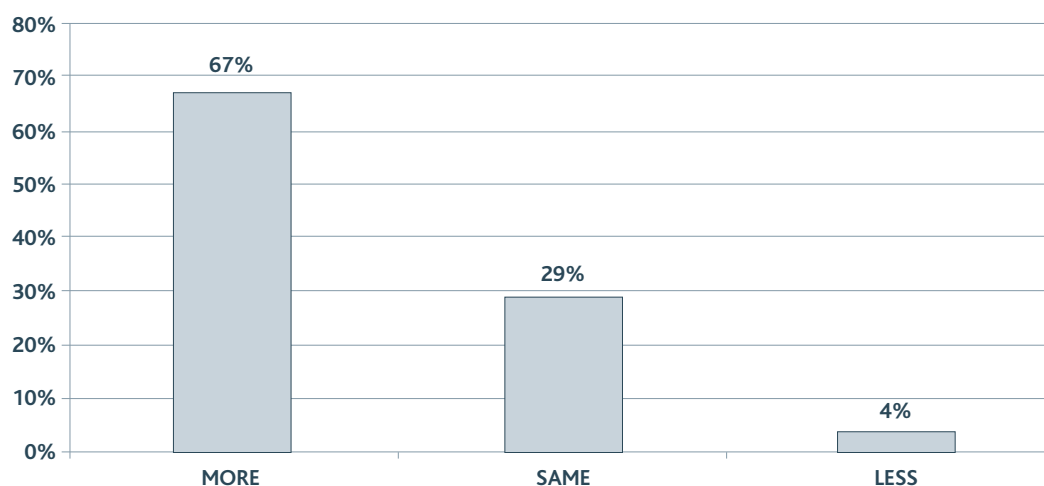
At the same time UK universities are being asked to prove their value to students through employability and career results.

This combination of pressures has created a situation where the A level exam system appears least able to deliver individuals with the skills and experiences required for university or career success. The need for exam success through A levels is further focusing learning, just when wider knowledge, global awareness and work-based skill sets are most in demand.

- Schools and colleges need to encourage more independent learning and thinking to be nurtured, and to develop ways to demonstrate that this has taken place.
- Applicants need to find ways to demonstrate 'soft skills', their experience of work situations and to highlight their life skills beyond academic qualifications.
- Creative thinking is highly valued in the university and work environment and the research indicated the value of creating space for this within the A level system, and systems to develop and measure it could be explored.
- A level examining bodies or other official organisations could further investigate methods to provide positive information and proof to the media that the A level system is not being devalued.
- Schools can consider switching to the IB system without any fear that it will undermine their academic reputation or their pupils' ability to compete for university places; against a wide range of academic criteria the IB scored favourably compared to A levels.

## 1. IB Applicants

### 1.1 DO YOU THINK YOU ARE SEEING THE SAME NUMBER, MORE OR LESS UK APPLICANTS WHO HAVE THE INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE RATHER THAN A LEVELS, COMPARED TO TWO YEARS AGO?

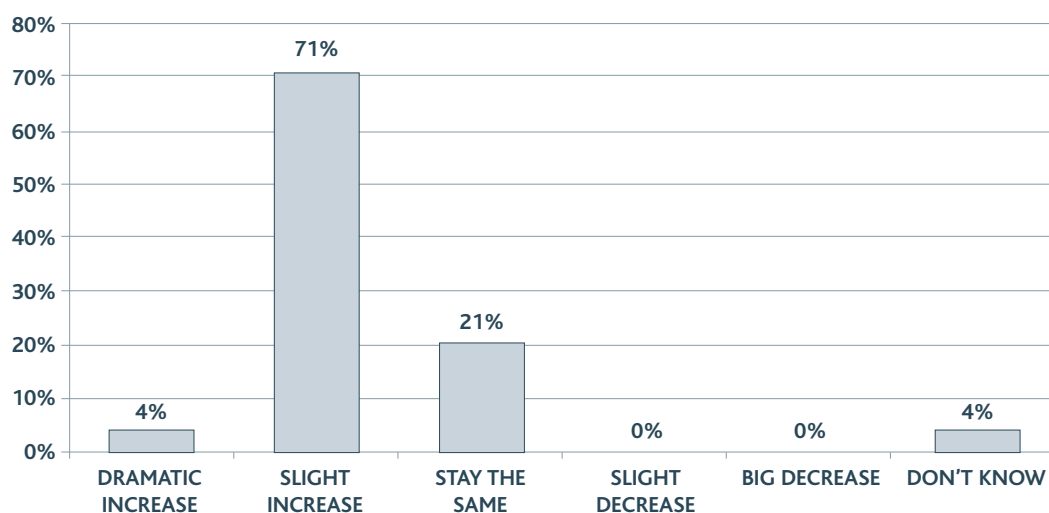


Two thirds of university admissions personnel say they have seen an increase in the number of UK students who have the IB rather than A levels.

This is to be expected as 36 new schools have been accredited to teach the IB Diploma in the past two years, and 52 since 2000. (Source: International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO)). When ACS International School first offered the IB Diploma in 1980 it was one of only four schools in the UK to offer this qualification, now some 84 schools including 47 which receive state funding offer the IB Diploma at sixth form level.

The respondents to this survey handled on average 1,226 applications from people with the IB Diploma qualification in the past academic year; these applicants could have studied for their IB in the UK or overseas. This average figure covers a wide variation in the volume of IB Diploma qualified applications which respondents are handling: at the top end of the scale 10 per cent of admissions personnel saw more than 2,000 IB qualified applicants last year, while at the lower end of the scale six per cent of respondents saw five or less applications from IB applicants.

### 1.2 WHAT CHANGE IF ANY DO YOU EXPECT TO SEE IN THE NUMBER OF UK STUDENTS WITH THE IB QUALIFICATION IN THE FUTURE?



Three quarters of admissions officers are expecting more UK students to study for an IB Diploma in the future, suggesting that they expect more schools or colleges to offer the IB Diploma programme of education as an alternative to A levels.

## 2. Why the IB?

The following question explores the reasons why admissions personnel feel schools or colleges might consider changing to the IB.

### 2.1 SOME SCHOOLS IN THE UK ARE SWITCHING TO THE IB FROM A LEVELS, OR OFFERING BOTH COURSES. WHICH IF ANY OF THE FOLLOWING FACTORS DO YOU THINK MIGHT BE DRIVING THIS CHANGE?

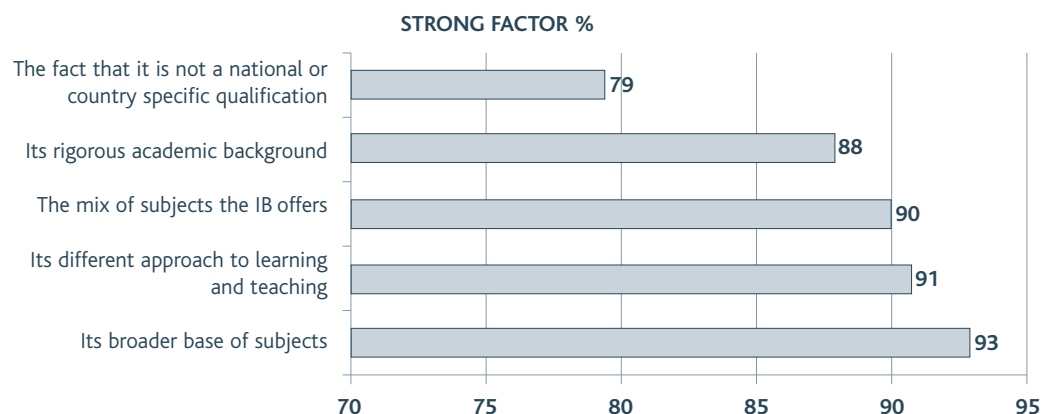
RANKED BY 'ANY FACTOR'	ANY FACTOR
	%
Its broader base of subjects	93
Its different approach to learning and teaching	91
The mix of subjects the IB offers	90
Its rigorous academic background	88
The fact that it is not a national or country-specific qualification	79
The base and tools it gives for university style learning	77
Growth in global awareness and culture	75
The languages it offers	73
Its application to work and real life	73
Growth in global mobility	71
Competition between schools	69
Loss of confidence in the A level system	68
Students trying to stand out when applying for a university place	65
Increase in global corporations and institutions	63
More demanding parents	59
The stability in its marking and examining systems	59
The community service it involves	48
Some other factor	15

### 2.2 STRONG AND SLIGHT FACTORS BELIEVED TO BE DRIVING THE CHANGE TO THE IB

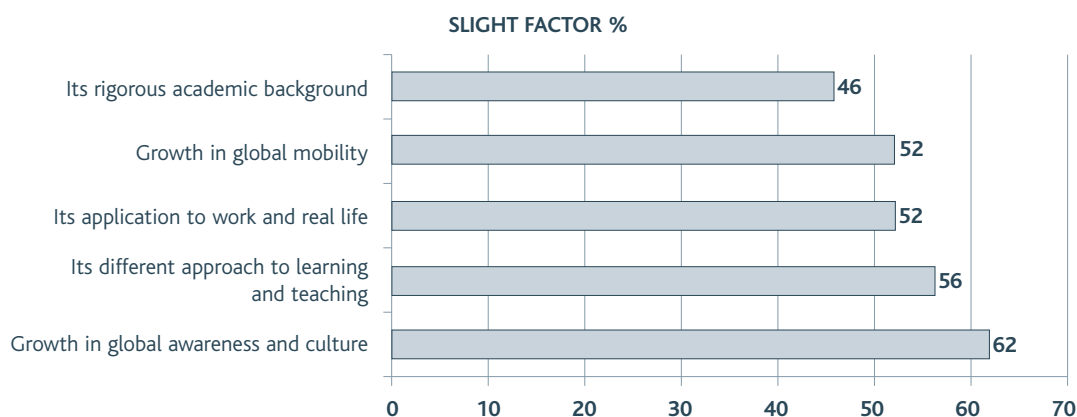
The most powerful drivers, shown in the following graph, are all positive 'pull' factors into the IB programme, including its broader base and mix of subjects, rather than 'push' factors away from A levels.

A third of admissions officers felt a loss of confidence in the A level system was a strong explanation for the switch to IB, compared to almost two thirds, 62 per cent, who felt it was more the option to study for a wider range of subjects which is driving schools to either offer the IB as an alternative to A levels, or to drop A levels altogether and only offer the IB.

**Some schools in the UK are switching to the IB from A levels, or offering both courses. Which if any of the following factors do you think might be driving this change?**



Looking at the range of factors which admissions personnel feel have a slight bearing, rather than a strong one, on the move to IB highlights an interesting and different type of driver, including the growth in global awareness and culture, and the IB's better preparation for real life and work. The following graph shows the top five rated factors believed to play a 'slight' part in encouraging schools to switch to the IB.



The broad base of subjects which have to be studied in order to complete the IB Diploma is clearly one of its biggest attractions as far as admissions personnel are concerned. Working from a prompted list of qualities, 'broad based education' was the quality most associated with the IB, followed, not surprisingly, by 'international'.

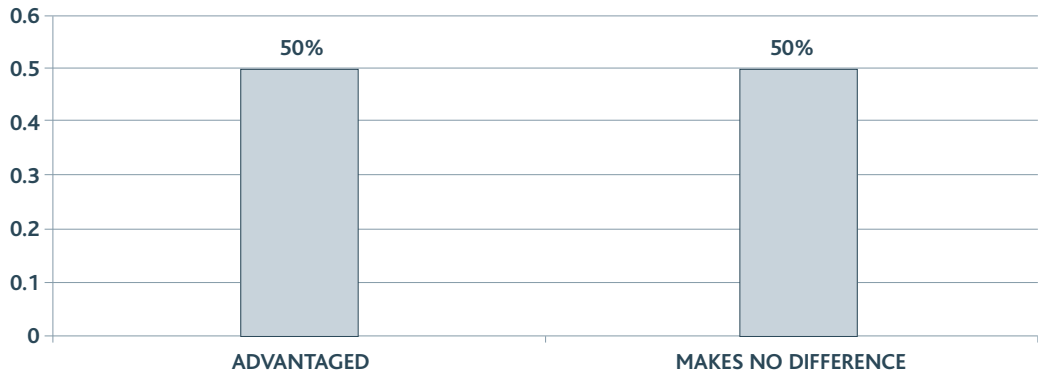
From the point of view of the student competing for a place at university, the third quality most associated with the IB Diploma, 'interesting', may well be a benefit if they are trying to stand out in a crowded market place.

### 2.3 WHICH IF ANY OF THE FOLLOWING QUALITIES DO YOU ASSOCIATE WITH THE IB QUALIFICATION, OFF THE TOP OF YOUR HEAD?

SUGGESTED LIST OF ASSOCIATED QUALITIES	%
Broad based education	98
International	94
Interesting	92
Academic rigour	88
Languages	85
Multicultural	83
Compulsory mix of arts and science	83
Forward thinking	69
Inquiry led study	63
Community or citizenship focus	56
Employment based	33

### 3. Comparisons with A levels

#### 3.1 DO YOU CONSIDER THAT THE IB, AS A PREPARATION FOR HIGHER EDUCATION AS COMPARED TO A LEVELS, LEADS TO STUDENTS BEING:



A half of admissions personnel feel that the IB is a better preparation for higher education compared to A levels, 17 per cent citing that IB qualified applicants are strongly advantaged and a third, 33 per cent, claiming they are slightly advantaged. No respondents believed it was a disadvantage.

The majority of benefits are linked to the broad base of study, or the style of learning involved. These points of view are illustrated by these two comments:

*"Students who have taken the IB tend to be more rounded and IB students tend to be stronger"*

*"The nature of the IB sits perfectly with university style studying, it's good preparation"*

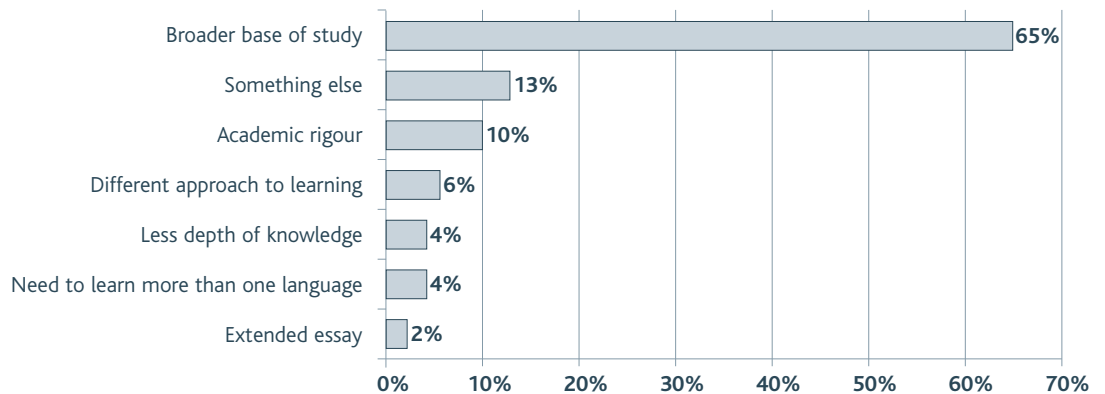
Of the fifty per cent who claimed that it makes no difference, several commented on the balance in their admissions procedure rather than the ability of the student to thrive while at university. The following comment illustrates this point of view:

*"The A levels and IB are considered equivalent, once students get in they start with a clean slate".*

When asked to cite differences between perceived qualities of the IB specifically compared to A levels, the broader base of study is again highlighted, followed by the academic rigour of the programme.

#### 3.2 WHAT TO YOUR MIND IS THE MAIN DIFFERENCE OF THE IB COMPARED TO A LEVELS?

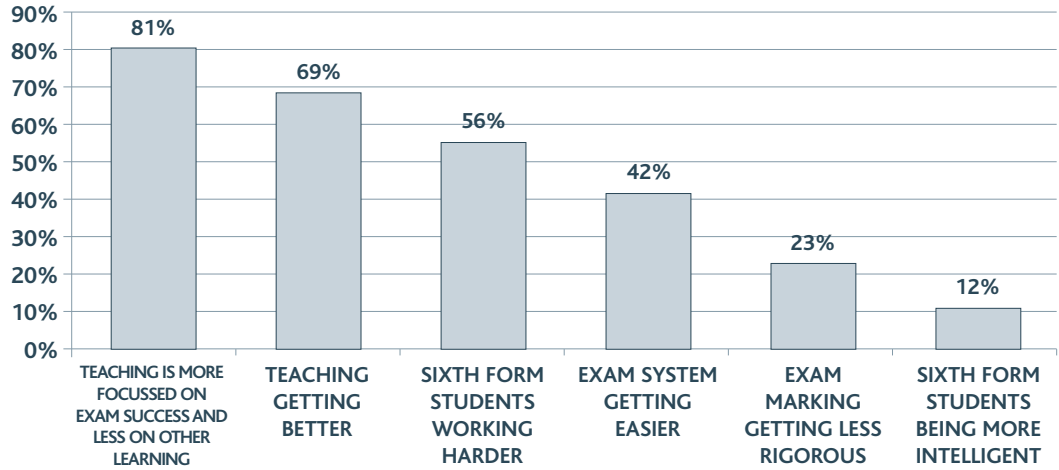
Do you think it is the...



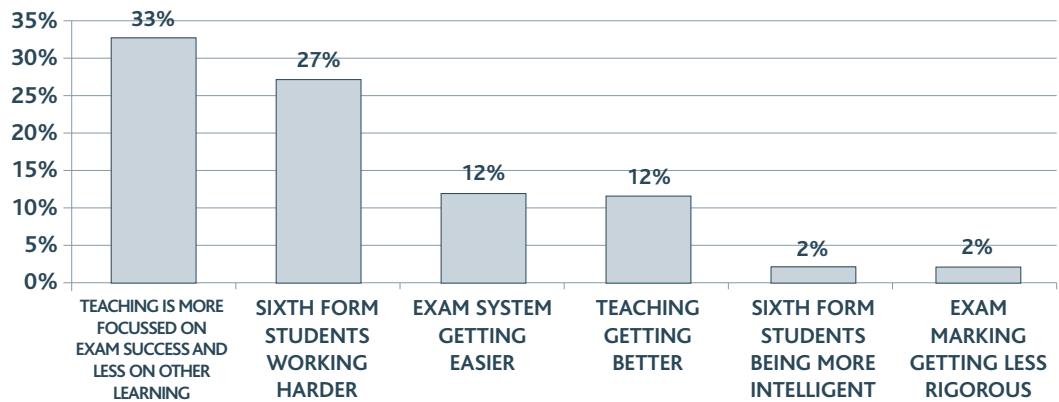
By far the most significant difference in the minds of admissions personnel between the IB and the A level system is the broader base of study of the IB. The other factors about the IB mentioned as the main difference included 'compulsory arts, science and language,' 'internationally recognised' and 'independent learning'.

**3.3 WHICH, IF ANY, OF THESE FACTORS DO YOU PERSONALLY BELIEVE LIE BEHIND THE INCREASING NUMBERS OF STUDENTS ACHIEVING TOP GRADES AT A LEVEL AND WHICH ONE DO YOU THINK IS THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTOR?**

Factors of any importance



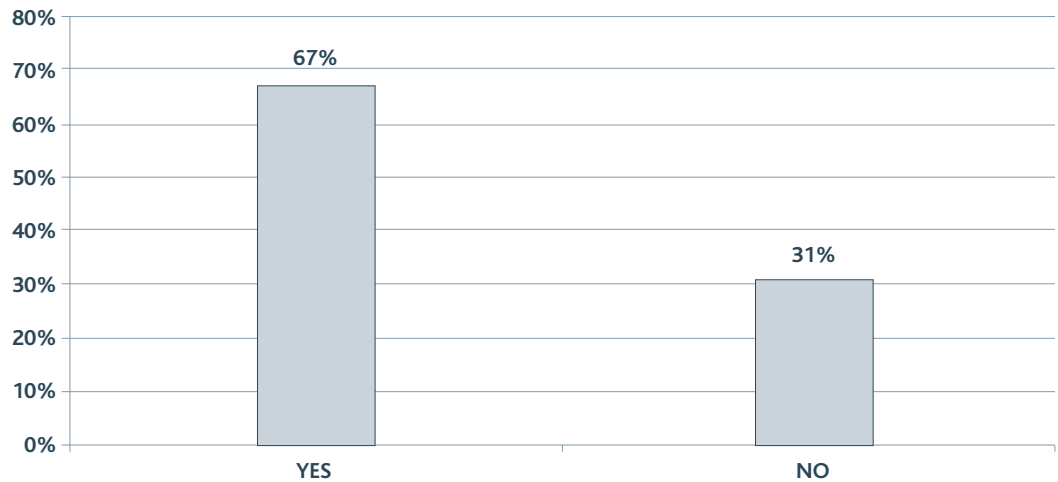
Most important factors



Admissions personnel are supportive of students and how hard they work to achieve their exam success. They do not feel that the exam marking is getting less rigorous, and few, 12 per cent, think that the exam system itself is getting easier. The issue which is most front of mind is the narrowing focus of learning to achieve exam success at the expense of other, perhaps just as enriching, learning for their student applicants.

### 3.4 DO YOU THINK THE MEDIA IS UNFAIRLY PORTRAYING THE A LEVEL SYSTEM?

With their strong support for students and teachers, it is not surprising that the majority of university admissions personnel feel quite strongly that the media is unfairly portraying the A level system. There is almost exactly a two to one ratio of those who think the media is unfairly portraying the A level system, and those who think that it is not:



A large number of respondents explained their views on the media portrayal of A levels. The following selection of comments illustrates the range of views which were expressed:

*"I do know how teaching and students work and there has been unfair comment."*

*"Only tends to happen when the A levels come out in the summer and they are short of other news."*

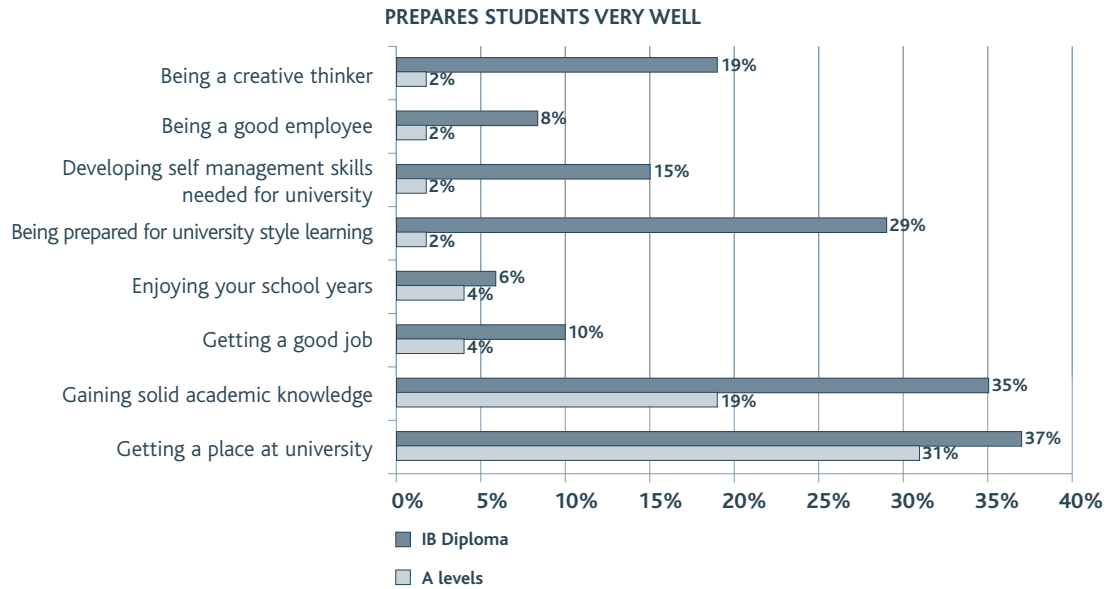
*"Every year they say A levels are getting easier but every year students are expected to achieve more and that's why the grades are getting better! Students are working harder!"*

*"I think it's fair to question the system because the base of study is too narrow, the A level is too specific and forces students to specialise too early in life."*

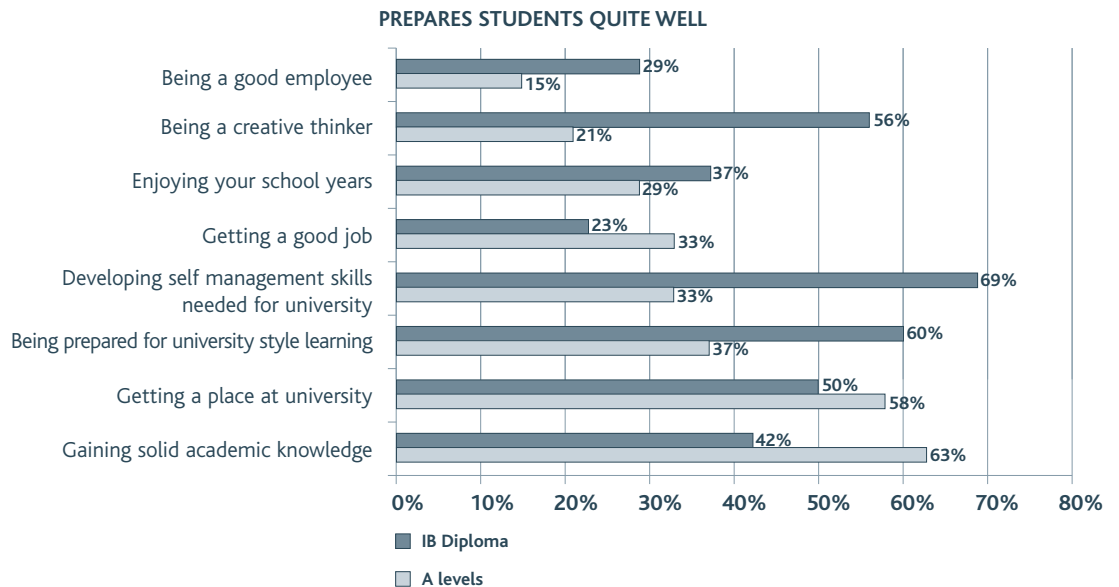
## 4. Employability

Considering the view that A levels might create a more focused education, the report explored the different ways in which the A level system might be preparing its students for their future life, as well as achieving a place at university.

### 4.1 HOW WELL DO YOU THINK THE CURRENT A LEVEL SYSTEM PREPARES STUDENTS FOR EACH OF THE FOLLOWING?



While the IB is considered by more to prepare students very well for getting a place at university and gaining solid academic knowledge, it stands out most distinctly from A levels in two other ways: preparing for university style learning and being a creative thinker.

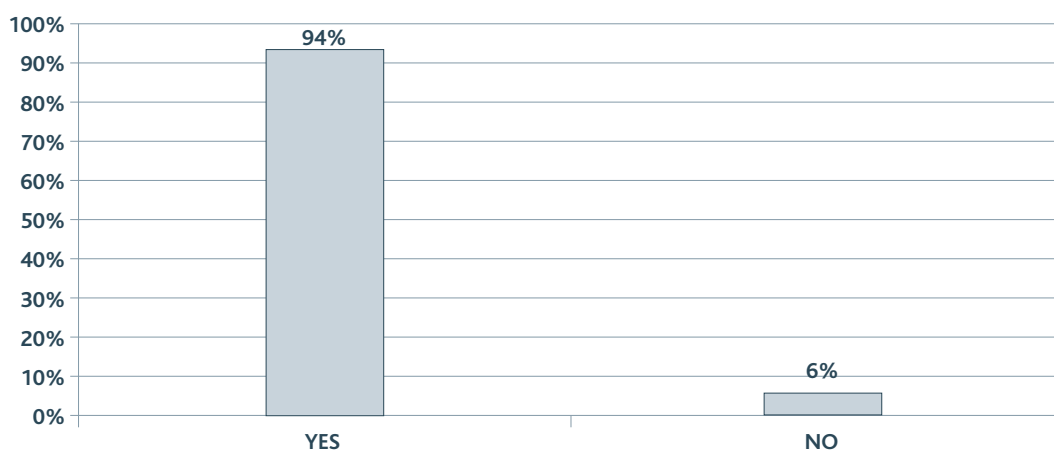


The above graph highlights qualities which A levels prepare students for 'quite well', and this reveals that the depth of solid academic knowledge gained through A level study is seen as the system's greatest strength.

The view that the IB style of learning is a better preparation for the style of learning in universities has been explored earlier in this report but is perhaps clarified a little here with the added description that the IB is a better preparation for 'developing the self management skills needed for university'. Creative thinking is a new description, and clearly a very positive one which could link in to future success or satisfaction in work and life.

The following question focuses on 'employability' within the higher education sector, and other personal qualities which students might possess beyond their academic qualifications.

**4.2 DO YOU THINK THERE IS A GREATER FOCUS ON MAKING STUDENTS MORE 'EMPLOYABLE' WHEN THEY HAVE FINISHED THEIR DEGREE THAN THERE USED TO BE?**



Overwhelmingly, admissions personnel believe that employability is a much more important issue nowadays. Again a wide range of comments were given to explain why this had happened and what it means within universities, many touching on the support and effort which is given to students by their universities; others commenting on the increase in vocation degrees and some referring to the need to justify the degree cost through career success.

The following comments are illustrative of the total range of replies:

*"Universities are geared to make students employable as it helps the university to have a good record. Universities also offer a lot more vocational courses."*

*"Everything we do is to encourage students to think about what they're going to do when they finish their degree. There's also the practical application to life skills."*

*"The more the fees increase the more people want a guarantee of what they'll get out of the course."*

How much does 'employability' feature even at the application stage within universities? What qualities should student applicants be demonstrating on their application form?

**4.3 DO YOU LOOK OUT FOR SIGNS OF ANY OF THE FOLLOWING IN STUDENT APPLICATIONS TO YOUR UNIVERSITY?**

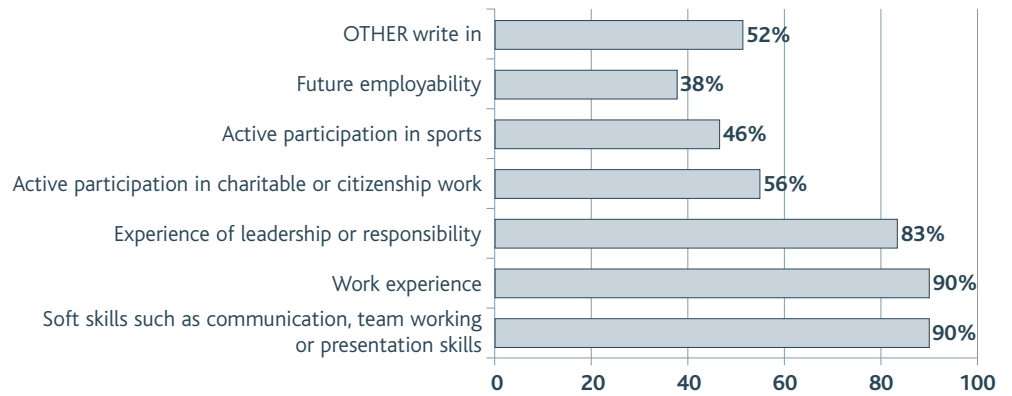
	YES	NO
Soft skills such as communication, team working or presentation skills	90	10
Work experience	90	10
Experience of leadership or responsibility	83	17
Active participation in charitable or citizenship work	56	42
Active participation in sports	46	52
Future employability	38	63
OTHER write in	52	-

While the majority of admissions personnel do not look out for 'future employability' they do look for indications that students have experience of the world of work, and the soft skills which employers will want. Soft skills have been described here as 'communication, team working or presentation skills'.

Being able to demonstrate work related skills is more important than participation in sports or charitable work.

The graph below, showing only the 'yes' factors which admissions personnel look for, highlights the importance of work experience related skills over sporting experience or any form of community service.

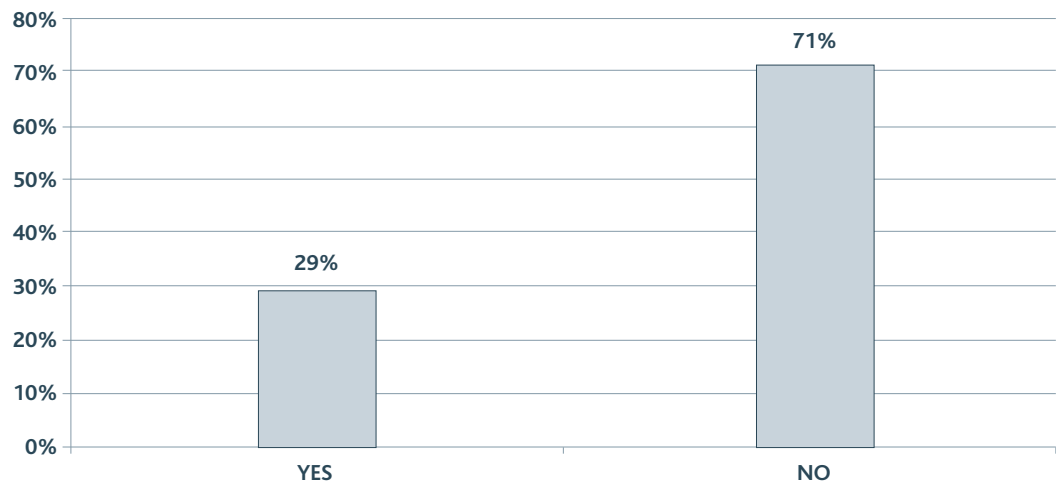
**LOOK OUT FOR SIGNS OF ANY OF THE FOLLOWING IN STUDENT APPLICATIONS**



The 'other' qualities which respondents mention include primarily academic ability, motivation, commitment or interest and writing skills.

## 5. Independent Exams

### 5.1 DO YOU THINK IT IS A GOOD IDEA THAT SOME SCHOOLS AND UNIVERSITIES ARE DEVELOPING THEIR OWN EXAMS TO HELP IDENTIFY THE VERY BEST STUDENTS FOR THEM?



Asked whether university admissions personnel think it is a good idea that some schools and universities are developing their own exams to identify which students are best for them, around seven in ten, 71 per cent, think this is not a good idea.

Given that many admissions personnel taking part in this survey think students are already over focussed on exam success rather than more broad based learning it is not surprising that there is relatively little support for an additional level of examination. Having said that, with just over a quarter of respondents, 29 per cent, agreeing that an individual additional exam might be a good idea, and many courses such as law already requiring a specific entry exam it seems quite likely that additional university entry exams could be introduced more widely than at present.

## Research Details

The 'IB or not IB' survey fieldwork is based on telephone research conducted by Stormark Ltd (DMA, TPS) and took place between 3rd April 2006 and 3rd May 2006. The questionnaire was developed by ACS International Schools in consultation with the Twelve Consultancy. All research was conducted according to the Market Research Society Code of Conduct which guarantees the anonymity of respondents. An incentive of £140 to a charity of their choice or mobile phone to this value was offered to one respondent in a prize draw from all those who took part.

There are currently 131 HEI's in the UK who can award their own degrees, and some 550 colleges which provide courses leading to degrees. The 52 admissions personnel who took part in this survey are drawn from all different HEI types across the UK.

	<b>NUMBER</b>
Old university	20
New university	17
Other HEI including veterinary or agricultural colleges	15
Total	52

The respondents were also drawn from different geographical regions of the UK

	<b>NUMBER</b>
Scotland	4
Wales	4
N. Ireland	1
London	4
Rest of England	39
Total	52

In the past academic year the admissions offices involved in this survey handled an average of 10,500 applications, with a maximum of 40,000 and a minimum of 1,200.



# ACS INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS

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ACS International Schools enrolls a total of 2,400 students aged between 2½ 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.

## **For further information**

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