

A Comparative Look at Two Paths to University in the United Kingdom: The GSE Advanced  
Level Examinations and the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme

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## Introduction

Everything is matter of perspective. From an American point of view, the college admissions process, no matter where a person lives, is a relatively simple and straightforward process even if it is sometimes frustrating. Students look at this time in terms of how many applications they need to complete, how many college essays they need to write, and then how long they will need to wait until they hear which universities accept them and which universities tell them that they are not exactly what they are looking for that year. Counselors and educators advise countless students to start thinking about their postsecondary plans as early as grade 10 with virtual tours, summer visits, and then finally, appointments with admissions offices all before students start filling out applications. Parents try to guide their children to the places and options they think might be best for them or alternatively, where they can afford to send them. From any set of eyes, however, the general steps for applying and getting into college in the United States are the same because the educational system is generally set up the same. For most students, high school graduation comes after completing four years of secondary education, usually in the same school. However, this is not always the case in other parts of the world and because of this, it effects how students come to universities. The purpose of this paper will be to look at two particular paths to university, the GCE Advanced Level Examinations (usually called A and AS levels) and the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) in the United Kingdom, and to discuss the issues associated with each path. In addition to discussing each of the paths mentioned, this paper will also address the Universities College and Admission Service (UCAS), a central governmental organization through which applications in the United Kingdom are processed for entry to higher education.

### Requirements for Secondary Schooling in the United Kingdom

For the purposes of this paper, comments related to secondary schooling in the United Kingdom will apply mainly to England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. The reason that Scotland is excluded from comments is that the A and AS Level Examinations which will be discussed in greater detail later are not commonly given in Scotland. In Scottish schools, students usually take Highers and Advanced Highers of the Scottish Qualifications Certificate instead. Some Scottish schools, however, do offer the IBDP.

In the United Kingdom, schooling is compulsory until age 16 and students are typically in the fifth year, called fifth form, of secondary school at that time. During the final year of schooling, students in most public schools sit for the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations. In secondary schools, GCSE courses are taken in a variety of subjects which are usually decided by the students themselves in year 9 (ages 13–14). Typically, the study of the chosen subjects begins at the start of year 10 (age 14–15) and then final examinations are then taken at the end of Year 11 (age 15–16). The number of subjects a student studies at GCSE level can vary but usually somewhere between eight and 10 subjects are studied.

GCSEs are not compulsory, but they are by far the most common qualification taken by year 10 and 11 students. The only requirement is that in state schools English, mathematics, science, religious education and physical education are studied during Key Stage 4 of the national curriculum. In England and Northern Ireland, students following the national curriculum (compulsory in state schools) must also study some form of information technology and citizenship. In Wales, Welsh language must also be studied. These subjects do not have to be taught for any examination though it is usual for at least English, mathematics, and science to be studied to the GCSE examination level. Students fill their other GCSEs with a mixture of other

compulsory national curriculum subjects and choice (elective) subjects. GCSE examinations are externally graded and scores are reported in the annual league tables. In many subjects, there are two possible tiers of exams that students can take – higher and foundation. Higher level exams expect a student to know a deeper level as well as a larger base of knowledge. GCSE grades are A\* (pronounced A-star), A, B, C, D, E, F, and G. If students would like to continue their education to the university level, it is suggested that students receive five or more upper level (A\* through C) grades. The A\* grade is new as of the 2009-10 academic year and will apply to both GCSE examinations as well as the GSE Advanced Level Examinations.

Depending on the scores students receive on their GCSE examinations, they may decide to enroll in a sixth form college to continue towards GSE Advanced Level Examinations.

Another option would be the International Baccalaureate Diploma. Besides the options just mentioned, students in the United Kingdom have several other options including employment, part-time skills-based tertiary education, and part-time academic education leading to additional GCSE examinations. Military service, if desired, usually does not begin in the United Kingdom until age 18. Employers do look at GCSE grades when selecting employees and generally, only grades A\* through C are given much weight.

#### The GSE Advanced Level Examinations (A Levels and AS Level)

Most students who take GCSE examinations and decide to continue their studies will remain in their same school. Some students, however, switch schools to a smaller sixth form college where classes will be smaller and it will be possible for them to get focused instruction for the subjects that they take GSE A Level and GSE AS Level Examinations in the following year (Eckstein and Noah, 1993, p. 49).

The GSE Advanced Level Examinations, commonly called A Levels, were first introduced in 1951 and replaced the previous qualification called the Higher School Certificate. In 1987, the Advanced Supplementary Levels, commonly called AS Level, were introduced to encourage students to broaden their knowledge of other areas and make them more well-rounded. They are worth half of a full A Level Examination but are of the same academic standard meaning that the topics studied are narrower but are of the same depth as the A Level Exams. Because so many students take A Level Examinations, they have become almost a kind of university entrance examination although some universities in the United Kingdom also require their own, separate entrance examinations and also accept other European credentials for admission (Parliament, 2003). Universities frequently demand minimum grades on A Level Examinations or the equivalent on other sets of qualifications before students are accepted to higher educational programs.

For the purpose of understanding what a student might actually go through, the process of preparing and taking A Level and AS Level Examinations and then looking towards university will be explained through the eyes of a hypothetical student, Jayne. Jayne, who would eventually like to be a graphic artist, lives in Truro, England, located 218 miles from London. She is not unlike many British students this year – Jayne took her GCSE examinations last year and achieved results that led her to a decision to pursue studies that would have her taking three A level exams and one AS examination. Because Truro does not have a sixth form college and actually does not have a university within the county boundary, Jayne is staying at her current school to study for her examinations. She has decided to take A Level Examinations in English, art and design, and French while she will take the AS Examination in mathematics. Each of these examinations requires Jayne to complete focused study and the workload is significantly

more advanced than she has seen in her past instruction. In addition, assignments related to preparing for these exams also require Jayne to complete more independent work, engage in more discussion with classmates and push her thinking beyond the boundary of the classroom. A Level and AS Level Examinations are given in January and June so Jayne can also balance her study time for exams and decide which exams may need the most attention or a longer study period. Further, if Jayne were closer to 16 when she took her GCSE examinations, she may not be as concerned with completing her A and AS Level Examinations as quickly as someone who was older when they completed their GCSE examinations. Many students in the United Kingdom do not start university until at least 18.

As Jayne prepares for her examinations in the four subjects she has chosen, she also needs to start a file with Universities College and Admission Service (UCAS), the governmental agency in the United Kingdom that will be the facilitator of her university applications. If Jayne wants to begin attending a university the following fall, she will need to begin her file with UCAS during the fall of the following year she took her GCSE examinations. As Jayne has aspirations to be a graphic artist and currently lives in Truro, three good choices for university might be Plymouth College of Art, University College Falmouth, and Arts University College at Bournemouth. All three choices offer degree programs in graphic design and all three also require Jayne to submit a portfolio of work as part of her application. She will also have to interview at two of these universities. Art programs often have earlier deadlines for submission of applications because of the interview and portfolio requirement, so Jayne will also have to be mindful of that and pay attention to UCAS requirements for transcripts and materials and university requests for interviews and her portfolio which she will need to continue to work on and polish while she is preparing for her A and AS Level Examinations. Of the universities that

Jayne might consider, Plymouth College of Art and Arts University College at Bournemouth have an application deadline of January 15. University College Falmouth has an application deadline of March 24. Also, depending on individual school requirements for her specific career and program aspirations, it is probable that Jayne would not be able to put off taking the art and design A Level examination she is studying for in June as the universities she is sending her application to would probably be most interested in that particular result. Given the course she would be applying for, it would be in Jayne's best interest to take the art and design A Level in January and to score as high as she possibly can on the examination. As Jayne takes her examinations in January or in June, her UCAS application file will be sent to her chosen universities with predicted examination grades.

#### The International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme

Instead of taking A and AS Level Examinations, another option for a student after taking GCSE examinations is to pursue the IB Diploma Programme (IBDP) as a route to get them ready for university level coursework. The IBDP originally came out of the International Schools Association (ISA) which was based in Geneva, Switzerland. The IBDP began in 1969 and is a two-year course of study that requires students to study material in six course areas culminating in a series of international assessments. Schools that offer the IBDP are permitted to allow students to pursue individual subjects or to require students to complete the entire Diploma sequence – an undertaking during which a student completes study and examination in six subject areas including foreign languages and the arts. In addition to this requirement, students are also required to complete three additional obligations that are unique to IB – a critical thinking and philosophy course called, Theory of Knowledge (TOK), the development and writing of a 4,000-word piece of original research known as the Extended Essay and the

completion of 150 hours of Community, Action, and Service, also known as CAS (Sjogren & Campbell, 2003, p. 55). There are approximately 100 languages available for students to study as well as 29 other subjects. Schools choose which subjects to offer depending on resources but must cover all six general subject areas.

Students are awarded an IB Diploma if they achieve a total score of 24 points or more on their exams, do not fail more than one exam, and do not receive an “E” (elementary) grade on either their extended essay or their TOK essay. These particular two papers are graded by external examiners and are sent away for grading prior to the exam period. Exceptional TOK or extended essays can also help a student’s total score by awarding up to an additional three points for particularly insightful work. Students in the United Kingdom, located in the Northern hemisphere take their exams in May with results becoming available at the beginning of July.

The TOK course is at the heart of every other IBDP course, as students in IB courses are continually asked to consider “how they know what they know.” The course examines different ways of knowing, the role of knowledge in culture, and the role of the knower or the learner, to the outside world (Schachter, 2008, p.27). That is one of the cornerstones of IB theory, that the knower is in the center of all instruction and it is he or she that often guides the learning in an IB classroom.

Just as was presented with the A and AS Level examinations, a hypothetical student will be created so that one might understand what a student would experience as they choose to undertake this path to university. Brian lives in Norwich, approximately 100 miles east of London. He received excellent grades on all of his GCSE examinations during his final year of compulsory schooling. Because of his high marks and Brian’s aspiration to study psychology at the university level, it was decided that Brian should transfer from his local school to Notre



Dame High School, a sixth form college in Norwich that also offers the IBDP. It is the feeling of Brian and his family that an IB Diploma would give him the breadth and depth that would later be useful to him in university-level work. In addition, the TOK course, plays into Brian's interests in psychology and would give him a chance to test out his career aspirations in this area before he is actually committed to a university program. Brian is also excited about the IBDP requirement of the Extended Essay and is looking forward to the fact that he will be permitted to explore a topic of his choosing in an advanced research project. Psychology is an examined area for the extended essay and Brian will be permitted to plan, set up, and conduct a psychological experiment for this assessment. In spite of these particular curricular attractions, Brian is definitely aware of the rigorous nature of the IBDP and the two-year time commitment that the program involves but is confident that he will be able to achieve the final Diploma score necessary to get him into the universities that he is interested in attending. In Brian's case, since many of the courses he will be starting will not take exams for two years, he will have some extra time to explore specific university options and will not have to start a file with UCAS as early as Jayne who is preparing for A and AS Level examinations.

For the first year of Brian's IBDP studies, he is engaged mainly in coursework although he may take one examination during that year. During the summer between the first and second year, Brian should begin to finalize the short list of colleges that he would want to send his applications and predicted grades to through the UCAS system. In his second year, he will initiate a UCAS file, complete his CAS hours and extended essay, finish all course internal assessments (each IB course has at least one) and then prepare for the examinations which are given in May. Brian's instructors will also provide for his UCAS file predicted grades for each of his IBDP examination subjects. As Brian's examination results and final IBDP total score are

not finalized until July, the universities that will be considering his application will need to make decisions based on his transcript and predicted grades. This can be very tricky for students who do not always measure up in examination rooms to their performance in the classroom or have an irregularity (illness, injury, other stressor) during the examination sessions.

#### The University and College Admissions Service (UCAS)

The University and College Admissions Service or UCAS as it is commonly called, is a clearing house for applications to almost all full-time undergraduate degree granting universities in the United Kingdom (UK). It was formed in 1994 with the merger of three different organizations, Universities Central Council on Admissions, Polytechnics Central Admissions Service, and Standing Conference on University Entrance. All students in the UK must apply to universities through UCAS and students wishing to go to universities in the UK from European Union nations and other countries must also apply through UCAS. Applications have been completed electronically since 2006.

UCAS provides resources to help students, parents, teachers, advisors, and counselors at institutions of higher education make informed decisions concerning what programs might be best for students. After students have selected which universities they would like to apply to, they may start to build an electronic application. Students may apply to up to five programs, called courses, in no order of preference. All five choices are confidential during the application process so universities considering an application cannot see any other choices. Applications must be completed by the middle of the January of the year that the student wishes to start university. For some courses, such as medicine, law, and art, and for some universities (Oxford and Cambridge) there are additional guidelines. The application includes current qualifications, employment and criminal history, a personal statement, and a reference. Predicted grades will

also be included if the student is still in school and applies to both A and AS Level Examinations as well as the IBDP. Once everything is considered complete, a student's application is then forwarded by UCAS to the institutions applied to, who then decide whether to make an offer of a place.

One of the things considered by universities in making admissions decisions about students is the UCAS Tariff. This is a number that each student receives for the qualifications that they have attempted, are in the process of attempting, or have achieved to date. The Tariff (effective 2002) attempts to cover all UK qualifications and many foreign qualifications a student could achieve. However, the Tariff is not without controversy as some qualifications are awarded higher point values than others and universities have the option to set their own criteria as well. In addition, it has been charged that some qualifications have been more favored than others because they had been included on the UCAS Tariff originally and others had only recently been added. This was the case with the IBDP (added in 2008) and the Republic of Ireland's School Leaving Certificate (added in 2006). In addition to A and AS Level Examinations, the IBDP, and the Irish Leaving Certificate, the Tariff also designates points for the Scottish National Qualifications, the College Board's Advanced Placement Program and some more obscure sounding qualifications like the Certificate of Personal Effectiveness and the British Horse Society Equestrian Qualifications.

Students who submit applications on time would expect to receive offers or rejections by March 28. If a student does not have any offers or declines all offers, there is an option for them to apply for a place at a course that still has spots available in April. Otherwise, the student would go through something called UCAS Clearing, a process where students can apply for

unclaimed university places in August. Offers from UK universities are either conditional and depend on final examination performance or unconditional.

Going back to Jayne and Brian, both students would need to complete their applications through UCAS with predicted grades and it is possible that both students would receive conditional offers unless their school performance or perhaps, Jayne's art portfolio, outweighed the university waiting for her A and AS level examination results. She could receive an unconditional offer if her portfolio and interviews made a strong impression on an admissions officer. Brian's situation and his desire to study psychology are slightly more complicated. Although Brian did achieve extremely strong marks on his GCSE examinations, in selecting a course in psychology, he is choosing a path nearly 80,000 applicants follow each year, with about six applicants for every available course place. Since Brian lives in Norwich, logical university choices might include Canterbury Christ Church University, University of East Anglia, and the University of Essex. All of the schools have three-year degree programs in psychology but all have different requirements for admission concerning the IBDP. According to the Entry Profiles provided by UCAS, the University of Essex is the most demanding in terms of the IBDP as they would like prospective students to have achieved 32 Diploma points (minimum is 24) and would also like students to have taken the specific course, Mathematics Standard Level. On the other end, Canterbury Christ Church University only requires the minimum 24 Diploma points while the third university, the University of East Anglia, would like prospective students to have achieved 31 Diploma Points. As a side note, the maximum amount of points a student could achieve for the IBDP is 45.

### Issues with A and AS Level Examinations as a Path to University

Although many students take A and AS Level examinations, they are not without debate. Politicians and academics have noted continuing grade inflation and in 2009 the pass rate for the A levels rose for the 27<sup>th</sup> year. A grades on A Level examinations were 26.7 percent of all students who took the exams and an eighth of all students scored three A grades as opposed to scoring a single A grade in 1982. A study by Durham University in 2009 concluded that an A grade in 2009 is equivalent to a C grade in the 1980s. “At the current rate of academic ‘improvement’, within nine years no one sitting an A Level will actually fail the exam, while over the same period the number of A grades will rise to more than a third of all entries (it is already over a quarter). Such are the wondrous effects of the grade inflation that has become endemic in public examinations” (Telegraph, 2009, ¶1).

One problem that many feel is now associated with the grade inflation issue is that a growing number of students are now applying for university places and universities are having a hard time distinguishing which students are really qualified for their courses since many students have more than three A grades. In 2008, Imperial College London announced that beginning with students applying for admission in 2010, the college will require students to write a separate entrance examination for Imperial College only. Sir Richard Sykes, rector of the college, claimed that the A Level examinations were nearly worthless and said, “Even if you interview all the students you still have a problem” (Bowcott, 2008, ¶3). The test to be developed by Imperial College will cover all courses with the exception of medicine and will assess general intelligence and creativity. Other universities are considering tests of their own. Cambridge and Oxford already require students to take additional examinations to submit with their UCAS documentation as do medical, some law, and veterinary courses.

The big question is why grades for the A Level examinations have become so inflated. One possibility for the continual grade inflation put forth is that external examiners push grades of exams that lie on the boundary more often up rather than down and this has been the cause of a subtle but steady year to year increase in A level grades. Another suggestion is that schools and teachers are getting better at preparing students for the examinations. What there has not been is a full-scale recent study of how the universities in the United Kingdom perceive the A Level examinations, especially in light of some of the other qualifications that students can obtain. As of September 2009, the head of Ofqual, the government body that monitors examination standards, said that A Level exams will not be reviewed to make it harder to get top grades.

#### Issues Related to the IBDP as a Path to University

The main issue associated with the IBDP as a path to university is availability. Currently (as of December 2009), there are 198 IBDP schools in the United Kingdom although all of those schools may not be public schools. Students and parents can face financial difficulty if the school that they would like to attend requires tuition. In addition, a proposal by former Prime Minister Tony Blair to extend the International Baccalaureate Programme to every local council was scrapped by Schools Secretary Ed Balls in 2008 so an IBDP school may simply not be in a student's local area.

Supporters of the IBDP see the two-year program as tougher than the A Levels and top IB scores are often seen as equivalent to six A grades at A Level. With Blair's proposal scrapped, 26 local education authorities lost the funding to begin the two-year candidate process with the International Baccalaureate Organization which involves school self-study, teacher training, curriculum development, and mentoring before schools start teaching the IBDP.

A report commissioned by the IB, called *Perceptions of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme* was published in October 2003. The researcher contacted 120 higher education institutions in the UK and found that 57 percent felt that the IBDP gave a distinct advantage to applicants in university courses, when compared with A Level examinations. The report also found that many who responded expressed the view that the DP and the examinations associated with the programme had not suffered grade inflation. The core parts of the IBDP – Theory of Knowledge, the Extended Essay and the CAS requirement were also viewed favorably as respondents felt these components provided applicants with additional depth. The universities generally feel that students who undertake the IBDP as a program for university preparation come to courses well-prepared for their university courses. Before adding the IBDP to the UCAS Tariff in 2005, UCAS studied the acceptance rates of IBDP students applying to universities and the rates of acceptance and rejection. They found that 4,599 applicants submitted 26,024 applications with 70.3 percent receiving an offer (conditional or unconditional) before clearing. The most popular subjects for IBDP students were law, psychology and English. There has been no follow-up study once the Tariff points were established.

#### Questions for Future Consideration and Conclusion

As basic and clear-cut the path to university admission can be in the United States, the paths to university in the United Kingdom can be curved and twisting because of the different qualifications a student could possibly use to meet the requirements for a particular university course. Although the United Kingdom streamlines the application process through the agency UCAS, the rules and small particulars for individual programs make the timetable in the United Kingdom much earlier than many American students would feel comfortable with. Some American high school students could not imagine having all of their college applications

completed by the end of October and others even wait to file applications until April 1. The UCAS practice of asking for predicted grades also keeps students focused on schoolwork and the fact the university offers can be conditional on examination performance takes away the American phenomenon of “senioritis” – the sensation of senior students believing that they are “done” simply because they know where they will be going the following year regardless of how many months they still have before graduation.

The university-level admissions test proposed by Imperial College London is an interesting idea as an additional measure to counteract A Level grade inflation but it may prove to be costly for the universities to each develop their own measure. What may be necessary is a serious, hard look at the A Level system or perhaps, a targeted research study on university perception of the A levels as compared to the IBDP and perhaps a couple of other comparable qualifications, such as the French Baccalauréat or the Scottish Advanced Highers. The Welsh have also developed a Baccalaureate but this qualification has only been available for a short time and these students are only starting to go to university. At one time, the United Kingdom itself was developing plans for its own Baccalaureate, but that has also been stalled. If A Level inflation is not curbed and students continue to receive more and more high marks, there may not be university places for all of them.

In terms of the IBDP, the schools in the United Kingdom already are doing a good job of preparing students for university. What needs to be done, however, is to not stifle growth of these schools and make sure that students have access to these educational opportunities. Too often, outside of the United States, IBDP schools are private or independent schools which charge tuition. These schools may also have competitive admissions policies. This is actually counter to IB philosophy which promotes equity for all learners. Encouraging growth of these



schools and looking for opportunities to close achievement gaps, especially in traditionally underrepresented population groups is a good area to move towards in the future.

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