



**ibscas**  
IB Schools and Colleges Association

# The University Admissions Officers Report 2016



About IBSCA

The IB Schools and Colleges Association (IBSCA) offers membership to all schools in the UK and Ireland offering International Baccalaureate (IB) programmes.

IBSCA exists to:

- provide a network of support for teachers through a range of professional development opportunities
- provide tailored support for individual schools
- liaise with Higher Education instutions and other relevant bodies to increase understanding of the value of the programmes.

For more information about IBSCA please visit the website [www.ibsca.org.uk](http://www.ibsca.org.uk)

About the IB

The IB was founded in Geneva, Switzerland in 1968 as a non-profit educational foundation.

The IB is more than its four educational programmes. At our heart we are motivated by a mission to create a better world through education.

We value our hard-earned reputation for quality, for high standards and for pedagogical leadership. We achieve our goals by working with partners and by actively involving our stakeholders, particularly teachers. We promote intercultural understanding and respect, not as an alternative to a sense of cultural and national identity, but as an essential part of life in the 21st century.

Our programmes for students aged 3–19 are:

- The Primary Years Programme (PYP)
- The Middle Years Programme (MYP)
- The Diploma Programme (DP)
- The Career-related Programme (CP)

For more information about the IB and our programmes please visit [www.ibo.org](http://www.ibo.org)

About ACS International Schools

Founded in 1967 to serve the needs of global and local families, ACS International Schools educate over 3,700 students, aged 2 to 18, day and boarding, from more than 100 countries.

We have three schools in the UK in Greater London: ACS Cobham, ACS Egham and ACS Hillingdon, and one school in Doha, Qatar – are all non-sectarian and co-educational.

We offer a choice of curriculum including all IB programmes, and US programmes including Advanced Placement (AP) courses and the new AP Capstone and International Diplomas.

The strength of our university preparatory programmes ensures that ACS students are consistently able to gain places at leading higher education institutions in the UK, the US and around the world.

For more information about our schools, please visit our website [www.acs-schools.com](http://www.acs-schools.com)

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Foreword

This is the 11th year this report has been commissioned and the IB Schools and Colleges Association (IBSCA) is pleased to have the opportunity to co-sponsor the report. The aim of the report is to provide students and parents with the evidence-based information they need to make informed choices and also to support the schools in their role as higher education advisors.

The UK education sector has undergone a number of changes in the last year, with the introduction of reformed GCSEs, AS and A Levels in England, new attainment and progress measures in English schools, examination boards dropping some modern foreign languages, and apprenticeships and grammar schools remaining discussion points throughout. Universities have similarly been affected by the introduction of the revised UCAS tariff which applies to university entry in 2016/7.

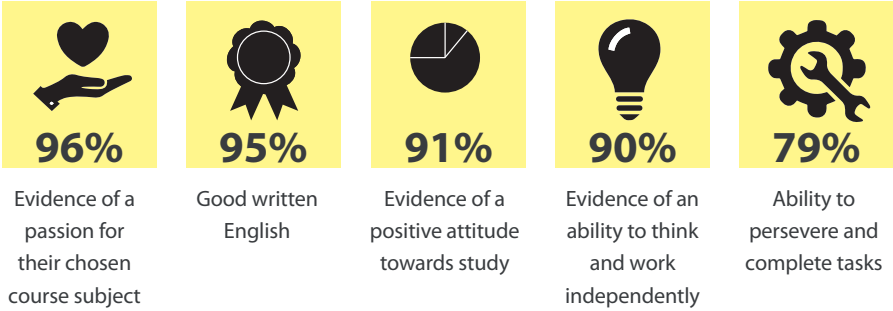
With an ever increasing number of learning pathways available it is important that we continue to benchmark and assess the impact of different education options in the UK and beyond. This report therefore surveys the views of UK and US university admission officers on the different post-16 education pathways and allows comparisons to be made between them.

*Dr Peter Fidczuk*

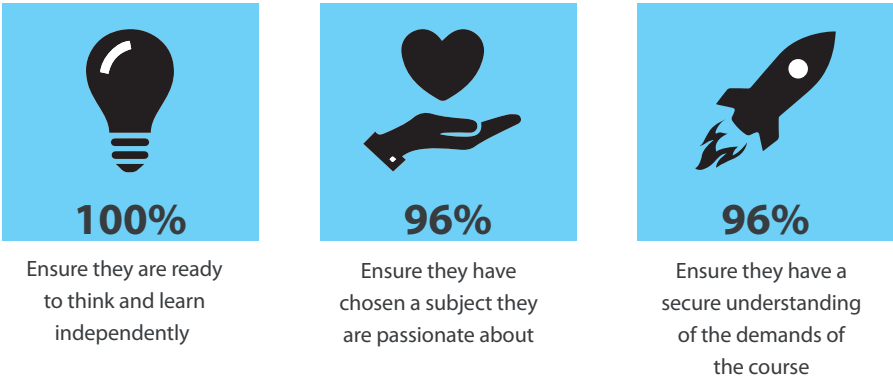
**Dr Peter Fidczuk**  
UK Development and Recognition Manager  
International Baccalaureate and IB Schools and Colleges Association

IBSCA summary of UK results

Top five attributes university admission officers look for in student applicants



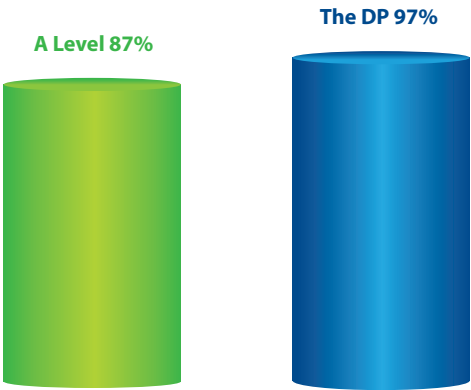
How could students be better prepared to thrive at university and to successfully complete their degree?



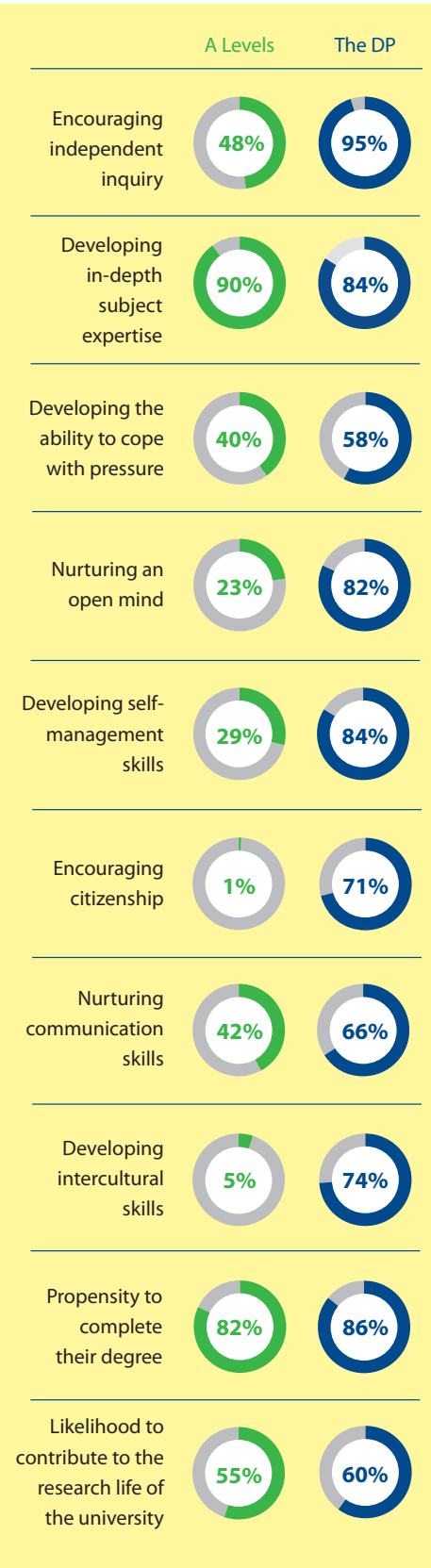
Which one would you say is most often missing?



What qualification would you say is the best preparation to thrive at university?



How well do these exam systems develop the following qualities in students?





“ From studying the IB Diploma Programme, I have been able to understand the best ways for to me learn academically.”  
*DP alumna*

Trends in university applications

Last year, UCAS figures show that UK universities admitted a record number of students.<sup>3</sup> The rise in undergraduate numbers was fuelled by increases in applications from overseas and European Union (EU) based students – applicants from the EU were up by 11%.

Our research has borne these figures out and also confirmed a further trend in the UK, which is a decreasing proportion of men attending university.

Chief Executive of UCAS Mary Curnock Cook said last year: “The equivalent of 32,000 young men are missing from our university campuses as young women are on average a third more likely to go on to higher education.”<sup>4</sup>

Below we have highlighted four figures from our research which each indicate significant patterns emerging in UK Higher Education. These are:

- the decreasing proportion of men applying to university with close to a third, 29% of university admissions officers saying they have seen fewer male applicants this year;
- almost three quarters, 72% reporting an increase in applicants offering the BTEC, which is an interesting figure to bear in mind given the views expressed later in the survey about its qualities as a stand-alone qualification;
- almost one in four university admissions officers observing an increase in applicants with the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme (DP) or the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ), both of which are indicators of students offering ‘something extra’ as we will see later in the survey, especially DP students;
- the increasing importance of possessing the personal skills to support university style learning, and the ability to thrive and complete tasks, with the DP scoring exceptionally well in this and other respects.

These trends are described in more detail throughout the survey, with trends in application numbers highlighted on the next page.

Have you seen more or fewer applications from the following types of undergraduates in this year’s cycle?

UK universities	More applicants	Fewer applicants
	%	%
Men	3	29
Access flagged	12	10
3 A* predicted	14	20
With the EPQ	39	15
With the IB Diploma Programme	38	11
With the PreU	12	14
With a BTEC	72	-
With the IB Career-related Programme	6	1



Are you aiming to admit more undergraduates overall for September 2016 entry than last year at your university?

	UK	US
	%	%
Aiming for more	57	70
Aiming for same number	38	25
Aiming for less	2	5
Don’t know / couldn’t say	2	-

Overall, in their current application cycle, universities in both the UK and US are looking for more students. University admissions officers in the US are far more optimistic than their UK peers though. For example, 57% of UK admissions officers are aiming to admit more undergraduates with 28% feeling it will be easy to reach their targets. By contrast, 70% of US admissions officers are aiming to admit more undergraduates but 45% feel they will reach their targets ‘very easily.’

How easily do you expect to reach your target number of undergraduates this year?

	UK	US
	%	%
Very easily	3	45
Fairly easily	25	35
Average, neither easy or hard	44	5
With some difficulty	28	10
With great difficulty	1	5

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/data-and-analysis/ucas-undergraduate-releases/ucas-undergraduate-analysis-reports>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/aug/13/record-number-university-admissions-cap-a-levels>

“ The fact that the IB requires a high level of independence and autonomy, to complete the core aspects of the Diploma (TOK, EE and CAS), ensures the skills required for successful transition to university are developed and embedded.”

Ryan Kelsall,  
Principal,  
Impington  
Village College

The difference between US and UK responses may in part be due to the rapidly changing nature of the UK university scene, where in less than 20 years, university education has gone from being completely free to the most expensive in the industrialised world. <sup>5</sup>

There is also now a variable fee structure within the country, for example in Scotland university tuition is free for Scottish citizens, but not for those born in England and Wales.

Last year, another seismic changes took place for UK universities where they were allowed for the first time recruit as many students as they like.

These changes and observations are included here because they could have an impact on competition for the best places, and for the best quality university experience.

The student experience

A huge amount is invested in Higher Education, both financially and emotionally. University can be the catalyst for significant personal change and development, and is often the experience which dictates the direction that the rest of our lives will take.

The pressure on those short years at university is intense and student expectations are very high. This reinforces the need for students to have a clear understanding of what universities have to offer, and what their chosen course will involve.

University admissions officers confirm that students’ expectations are continuing to increase, as shown in the question and table below:

Do you think students expect something different from their university experience now than they did three years ago?

	UK	US
	%	%
Yes, expect something different	91	90
No, don’t expect anything different	7	10
Don’t know	1	1

By the same measure, do you think students put more into their university studies than they did three years ago?

	UK	US
	%	%
Yes	16	25
No	79	65
Don’t know	5	10



The pressure on our youngsters to succeed, and on universities to deliver a superb quality education experience, is intense. No university – or parent – wants a student to be so unhappy with their personal situation, subject choices or teaching that they drop out.

How can we help minimise the risk of this happening? We asked this question in our survey of university admissions officers.

In which, if any of the following ways do you think students could be better prepared to thrive at university, to successfully complete their degree?

	UK	US
	%	%
Ensure they are ready to think and learn independently	100	95
Ensure they have chosen a subject they are passionate about	96	80
Ensure they have a secure understanding of the demands of the course	98	85
None of these	-	

Which one would you say is most often missing?

	UK	US
	%	%
...ready to think and learn independently	62	54
...chosen a subject they are passionate about	3	-
...have a secure understanding of the demands of the course	32	46

The answers show clearly that being prepared is crucial to thriving at university.

This means not just being prepared in the short term, such as through researching choices and having a secure understanding of what a course would involve, but being properly prepared and educated for the long term, ready to think and learn independently.

University admissions officers agree whole-heartedly, 100% in the UK, that being prepared to think and learn independently is the most important factor behind thriving at university and yet is the quality which is most often missing, according to two thirds, 62% of the same admissions officers.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/universityeducation/12013303/University-students-in-England-pay-the-highest-tuition-fees-in-the-world.html>

“ The Diploma Programme is a true vision of education and I believe it is the best preparation for our students’ undergraduate studies.”

*Katy Ricks,  
Headmistress,  
Sevenoaks School*

School education needs to teach our youngsters to think and learn independently. This includes developing crucial life skills, not just how to remember facts and pass exams successfully.

We explore the detail of what qualities the different exam systems do help to teach later in this research, but ask a summary question here to focus very specifically on how well the different exam systems prepare students to thrive at university.

**Overall what score out of five would you give these different qualifications, for how well each prepares the student to thrive at university?**

**A score of one is low, doesn’t prepare well and five is high, prepares extremely well overall.**

UK	Score 4 or 5
	%
IB Diploma	97
A Levels	87
Scottish Highers	69
Pre U	73
BTEC	19

US	Score 4 or 5
	%
IB Diploma	100
AP Capstone	91
A Levels	60
Advanced Placement or AP	25
High School Diploma	-

In both the UK and US there is near total agreement that the DP is the best qualification to prepare students to thrive at university.

In the US, the AP Capstone is a relatively new education qualification, but has gained a good reputation among universities as our research shows. Designed very closely around the DP to include two routes of study, AP Seminar and AP Research, it also includes a 5,000 word research project like the DP’s Extended Essay.

Looking at the detailed response to this question, the quality of the DP stands out in particular for how well it is thought to prepare students for Higher Education.

**Overall what score out of five would you give these different qualifications, for how well each prepares the student to thrive at university?**

**A score of one is low, doesn’t prepare well and five is high, prepares extremely well overall.**

UK	Score 5
	%
IB Diploma	41
A Levels	16
Scottish Highers	7
Pre U	15
BTEC	1

US	Score 5
	%
IB Diploma	38
AP Capstone	9
A Levels	-
Advanced Placement or AP	-
High School Diploma	-



Comparing different education programmes

What difference can it make, choosing one school education programme or curriculum over another? Our research shows that it could make a huge difference to the chance of success at university.

As we have seen, university admissions officers believe that exam systems are not all equally good preparation for university style learning.

The main exam system offered in England and Wales for 16 – 18 year olds is A Levels, but a BTEC qualification is an alternative.

In Scotland, students follow Scottish Highers instead of A Levels, although these and the BTEC may also be offered.

The DP is offered in 123 state and private schools across England, Scotland and Wales,<sup>6</sup> but is not a ‘state’ controlled qualification. The Pre-U is also not a state-run system and is only offered by a handful of private schools.

In the US the education programme can vary between different States, where each may have its own variant on the High School Diploma. The Advanced Placement (AP) and the

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.ibo.org/country/GB>

“ The IB is a unique educational experience that prepares students much more effectively for a range of options after they have left school.”

Paul Luxmoore,  
Executive Head  
Teacher, Coastal  
Academies Trust

new AP Capstone programme is offered in both government and private schools, as is the DP.

The views of our sample of university admissions officers enables us to drill down into the different qualities these exam systems develop in students.

The following table includes the key skills of independent thinking and learning identified as of crucial importance to thriving at university. The results from the UK and US are presented in separate tables, allowing us to compare the different qualifications available in each country.

It is clear that in each country the DP is considered the best preparation for university life. It is the qualification considered best at developing a wide range of skills, not just self-management or independent inquiry which is so vital for university success, but many others ranging from intercultural skills, to creativity and to an ability to cope with pressure, so important to our life-long social and personal development.

How well do you think each of these exam systems, A Levels, the IB Diploma and the BTEC develop the following qualities in students at present?

UK	A Levels	IB Diploma	BTECs
	1 = does not develop the quality well at all 5 = develops it extremely well.		
	Score 4 or 5		
	%	%	%
Encouraging independent inquiry	48	95	9
Developing in-depth subject expertise	90	84	15
Developing self-management skills	29	84	15
Nurturing an open mind	23	82	8
Developing intercultural skills	5	74	3
Encouraging citizenship	1	74	3
Nurturing communication skills	42	66	19
Developing ability to cope with pressure	40	58	8
Encouraging creativity	6	42	10
Developing workplace skills	5	18	81
Instilling a positive approach to risk taking	9	26	2

US	AP	IB Diploma	AP Capstone
	Score out of 5	Score out of 5	Score out of 5
	1 = does not develop the quality well at all 5 = develops it extremely well.		
Encouraging independent inquiry	11	100	100
Developing intercultural skills	-	100	46
Developing self-management skills	5	100	100
Encouraging citizenship	-	95	46
Developing in-depth subject expertise	-	79	92
Nurturing an open mind	-	89	92
Nurturing communication skills	6	73	85
Developing workplace skills	-	68	38
Instilling a positive approach to risk taking	11	63	54
Developing ability to cope with pressure	16	47	46
Encouraging creativity	-	42	46



The quality of the university experience comes not just from what the university offers the student, but also from what the students put in themselves.

For example, a university tutorial group will be lively and intellectually stimulating if the students in the group come forward with challenging questions or opinions. In the US the contribution of students to the life of the college through clubs and societies is especially important.

The next tables explore how well different exam systems prepare students to engage and be able to contribute to the life of the university.



“Through studying the IB, my opportunities were kept open, so depending on what path I took, there were no limitations.”

Edward Leader,  
CP alumna,  
Dane Court  
Grammar School

How well do you think the same three exams develop the following qualities?

UK	A Levels	IB Diploma	BTECs
	1 = does not develop the quality well at all 5 = develops it extremely well.		
	Score 4 or 5		
	%	%	%
Propensity to complete their degree	82	86	11
Likelihood to contribute to the research life of the university	55	60	5
Likelihood to study to MA or PhD level	49	49	2
Skills to lead work and study groups	15	28	13
A desire and ability to organise clubs and societies	5	8	6

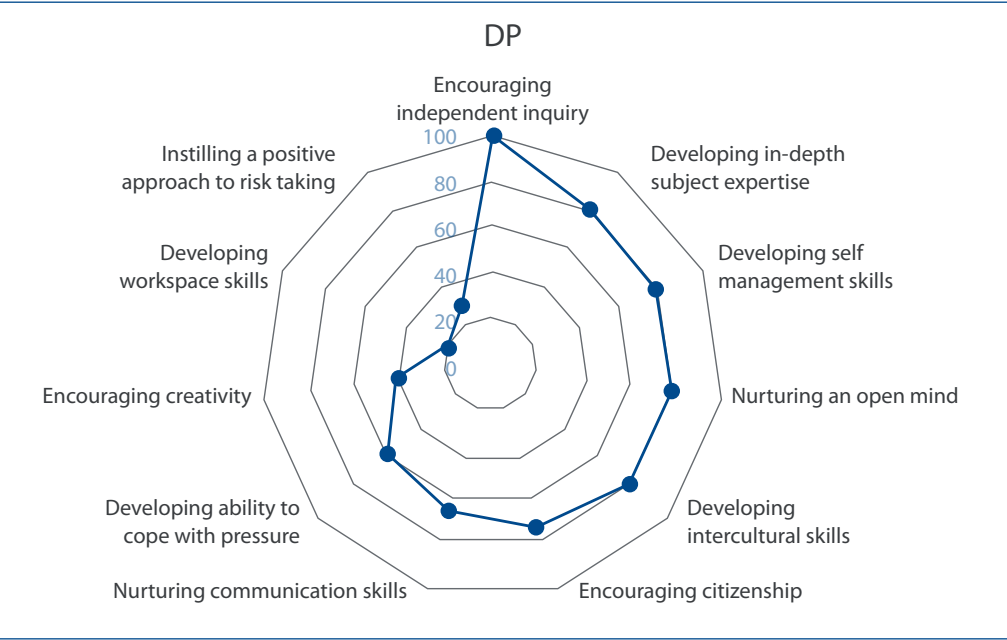
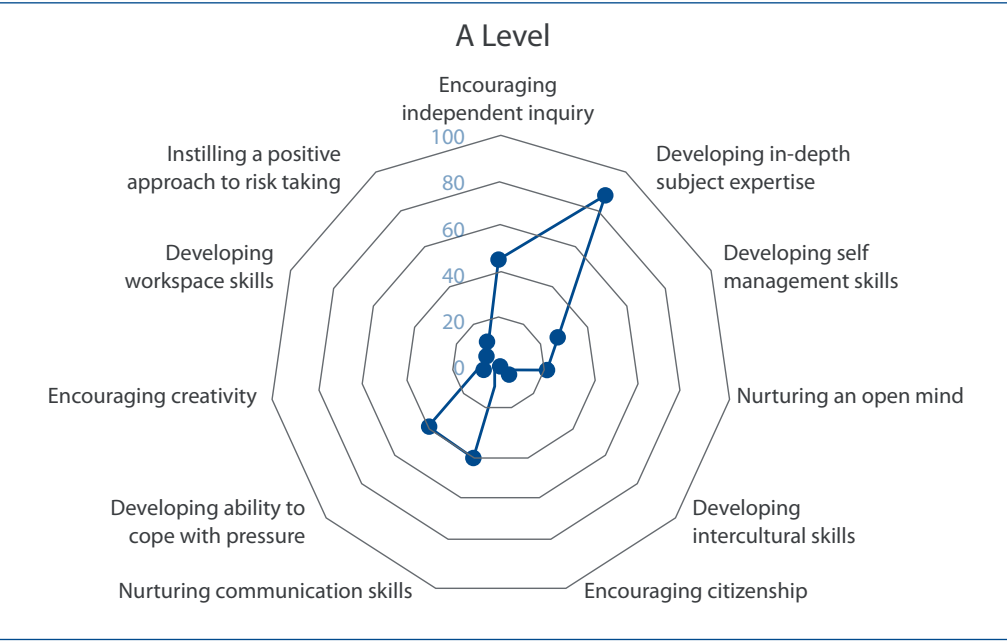
US	AP	IB Diploma	AP Capstone
	1 = does not develop the quality well at all 5 = develops it extremely well.		
	Score 4 or 5		
Propensity to complete their degree	32	84	85
Likelihood to contribute to the research life of the university	21	79	77
Likelihood to study to MA or PhD level	11	79	77
Skills to lead work and study groups	5	68	69
A desire and ability to organise clubs and societies	-	21	8

In both the UK and the US, the DP is considered best for developing key qualities needed to lead work and study groups, to contribute to the research life of the university, and even to complete their degree.

Many educationalists talk of the importance of developing a wide range of skills in our youngsters. In a report for the British exam board, Pearson published in June 2016, Charles Leadbeater, former government adviser noted:<sup>7</sup>

“We need to teach pupils problem-solving, not just to follow instructions. Schools are failing to equip pupils for an uncertain world and should teach problem-solving skills rather than simply training children to follow instructions.”

The data from our own survey demonstrates just how ‘single-minded’ some qualifications have become. For example, A Levels are considered excellent in developing in-depth expertise, but many other qualities, including those most highly valued by universities such as self-management are hardly developed at all.

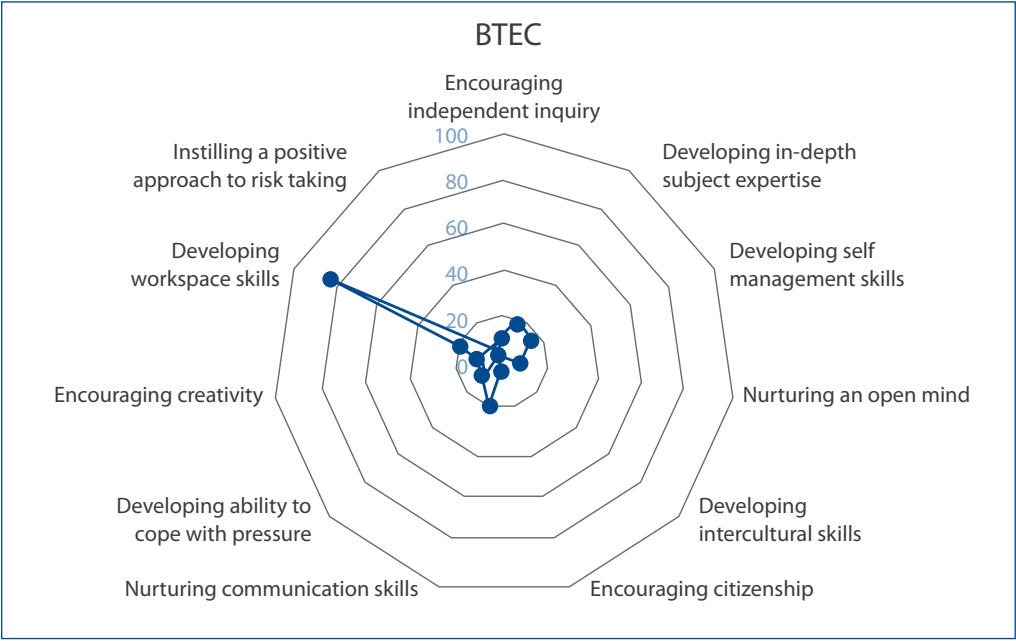


<sup>7</sup> <http://schoolsweek.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/The-Problem-Solvers.pdf> <http://schoolsweek.co.uk/teach-pupils-problem-solving-not-just-to-follow-instructions-says-former-blair-adviser/>



“ IB programmes allow teachers and students alike to think beyond the subject and standard syllabus you would find within the national curriculum.”

Julia Watson,  
Assistant Principal,  
Dwight School  
London



By taking the above data and presenting it in graph format, we can see more clearly that in the UK the DP is the only qualification which develops a balanced range of skills. To conclude our exploration of the role of different exam systems in preparing students to thrive at university we asked university admissions officers in the UK a very specific question relating degree outcome to school qualification, as shown below:

How good a predictor of final degree outcome would you say these three different qualifications are?

UK	A levels	IB Diploma	BTEC
	%	%	%
Very good	7	20	1
Fairly good	76	65	27
Average, neither good nor bad	13	10	43
Not very good	-	-	15
Not good at all	-	-	7
Don't know / couldn't say	4	6	7

The DP stands out clearly above both A Levels and the BTEC as a very good predictor of final degree outcome.

One in five, 20%, of university admissions officers see the DP as a very good predictor of degree outcome, compared to just 1% who see the BTEC and 7% who see A Levels as a very good predictor of degree outcome.

Similarly, in the US university admissions officers see the DP as an excellent predictor of final degree outcomes.

Applying to university

Over 635,000 students have applied for an undergraduate place to study in the UK this year. 2016 is on track to be another year with a record numbers of applicants.<sup>8</sup>

The key questions for students and parents are therefore how to identify the best university and course to study at, and how to secure a place.

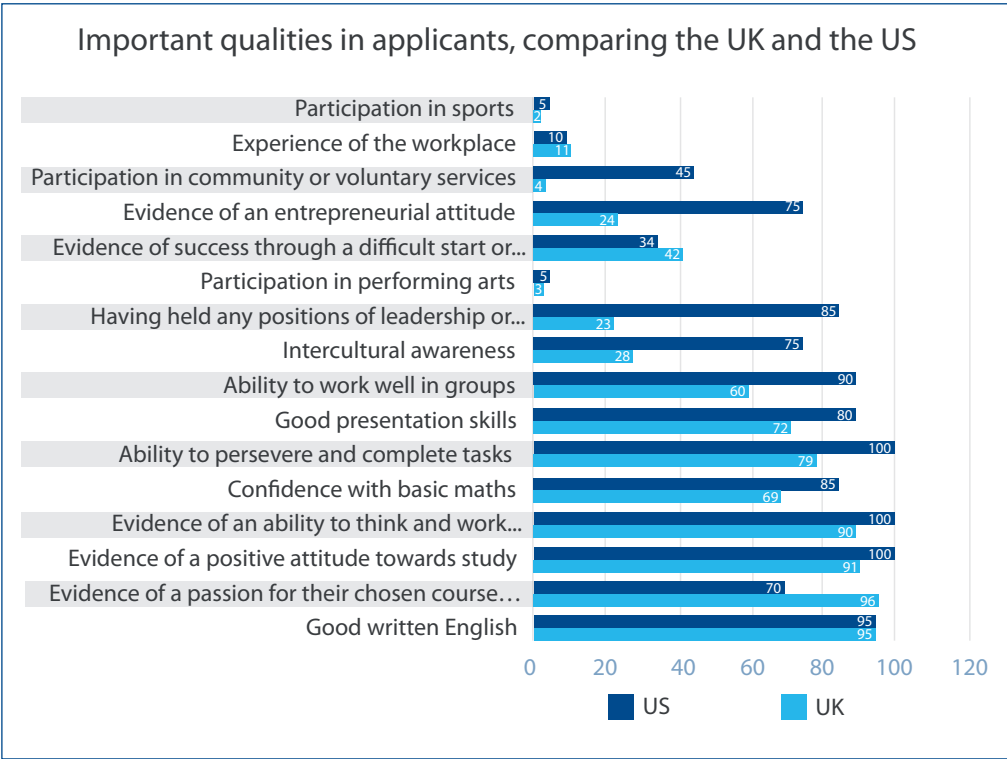
As we have seen, the actual post-16 qualification being studied is one indictor to university admissions officers of your quality to them, but what other factors are important?

What should applicants emphasise in their statements, to highlight their key strengths and credibility?

We asked the following question of university admissions officers, so that students can develop the skills and experience which universities are looking for, and highlight these in their application forms.

Regardless of what exam course they study, which of the following qualities do you actively look in applications to your university, in addition to any academic qualification, and how important is each?

Scale of 1 – 5 where 1 = not important, 5 = very important and 0 = don't look for this quality.



In response to issues raised in conversation with university staff, we asked about a new subject this year, 'the ability to persevere and complete tasks'.

Interestingly, this quality has been immediately ranked as a top 10 skill. It is a quality which students can demonstrate on their application form through their work, such as completing the EPQ for A Level students.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-31041413>



“ The breadth of subjects within the DP gave me opportunities to discover my academic passions, especially because I didn’t have to focus and restrict my future opportunities at just 16.”

Martina Ghinetti,  
DP alumna,  
Impington  
Village College

The importance of this quality, perseverance to complete tasks, also explains why the DP is so valued. It includes an Extended Essay, the model on which the EPQ was based; a course on the Theory of Knowledge plus the requirement to continue to study mathematics and foreign language. Completion of these activities are all signs of being able to persevere and complete a task well.

Broadly speaking, university admissions officers from the US value very similar skills, especially the ‘universally required’ ability to think and work independently, but most notably value entrepreneurial skills and team work more highly than their British counterparts.

The slightly different skill emphasis of American university admissions officers will reflect the more collegiate, liberal arts approach of universities in the US. Students considering applying to university in the States should bear this in mind in their applications.

The International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme

This chapter is devoted to exploring in more depth the understanding and views university admissions officer hold specifically of the DP.

We have already seen that the DP is considered a good predictor of final degree outcomes. What other qualities does it suggest, perhaps good and bad? We tested this through the following question.

If you see an application from someone who has studied for the DP which if any of the following does it signal to you?

Someone who...	Agree	
	UK	US
	%	%
...is highly likely to complete their degree	96	100
... has the ideal skills to thrive at university	93	100
...will contribute to life on campus	80	95
... has attended an international school	17	10
...is more likely to do a second degree	15	10
... whose education is too broad for certain courses	-	5
... has been privately educated	6	-
It doesn’t signal anything either way	2	-

A student with the DP is seen to have some stand-out, positive qualities - those most desired skills of an ability to persevere and complete a task, plus the skills to thrive at university we identified earlier - being able to think and work independently.

Also, a quality we have seen which is especially valuable in helping to create a good quality student experience - making a positive contribution to life on campus.

But how does the DP compare to A Levels in terms of entry requirements? We asked university admissions officers in the UK what DP score would be required compared to different A Level scores, and the answers are shown below.

The top score in the DP is 45 points. What do you consider to be the A Level equivalent of the following DP scores?

IB Score of 45	Average	IB Score of 35	Average	IB Score of 30	Average
	%		%		%
A*A*A*A	2	A*A*A*A		AAB	22
A*A*A	23	A*A*A		AABB	2
A*AA	13	A*AA	5	ABB	30
AAAA	27	AAAA	2	ABBB	
AAAB	2	AAAB	2	BBB	15
AAA	22	AAA	40	BBC	25
AAB	8	AAB	28	BBCC	2
ABB	2	ABBB	2	BCC	2
ABBB	2	ABB	15	CCC	3
		BBB	5		
		BBC	2		

Clearly there is a considerable degree of variation in the DP score equivalency to A Levels, as you would expect from 81 different universities.

It should be noted that while 72% university admission officers consider the top score in the DP of 45 to be equivalent to three A’s at A Level, the two scores are very different indeed.

Just 3% of DP students achieve the top score of 45, while 25.9% of A Level students achieve at least one A grade, and 12% overall achieve three A or A\* grades.

However, a high proportion of university admissions officers would accept an DP student who hadn’t completed every aspect the programme, which introduces a useful element of flexibility:

Would you accept three IB higher level subjects on their own, without the rest of the DP elements, such as the Extended Essay, as an entry qualification to a first degree course at your university?

	%
Yes	63
No	33
Don’t know	4



“ Overall the CP has helped me to strive for more than just an average job. I am lucky to say I experienced the CP and am now a better person for it.”

April Harper,  
CP alumna,  
King Ethelbert  
School

The subject of flexibility in entry requirements is highly topical among university admissions officers in the UK.

In Britain, traditionally universities make an offer to an applicant which is conditional on that student achieving a specific score in their final school exams. In the US, universities make an offer based on a variety of factors, but don’t wait until the final exam grade is confirmed before making a firm offer.

The UK seems however, to be moving closer to the American system as the following questions suggest.

**Have you made any unconditional offers to applicants who have yet to complete their final exams?**

UK	2016
	%
Yes	50
No	48
Don’t know	2

**One university has introduced flexible offers this year. Will your university introduce them next year?**

UK	
	%
Yes	4
No	46
Possibly	14
Don’t know	37
Total	101

To conclude, this research has shown that the DP is a very highly valued education programme, and is a signal of quality to university admissions officers. While more and more schools around the world are offering the DP to their students, it is still a relatively unusual qualification to follow. In our research UK university admissions officers report it as representing 7% of all applicants and in the US 14%.

Our survey results would suggest that these seven or 13% will stand out for many very positive reasons indeed, and be extremely well prepared to secure a good university place, and to thrive once they arrive there.

## Appendix

### Methodology

The research was conducted through telephone interviews with 81 university admissions officers in the UK and 20 from the US from 22 February – 12 April 2016.

In the UK, the sample covered around a third of all universities, including 10% Russell Group; 12% Million Plus Group; 16% 1994 Group.

In the US, the survey included a range of universities by geographical location and type but included two of the universities in the US News top 20 ranking.

The survey was carried out on behalf of ACS International Schools, the International Baccalaureate (IB) and the IB Schools and Colleges Association (IBSCA) by an independent organisation working to Market Research Society (MRS) standards.





Notes

Notes

