



*The Ultimate Guide to the*

# **International Baccalaureate**



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# About the Authors



## **Sandhya DT**

*University of Oxford,  
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Based in Melbourne, Sandhya completed the IB Diploma Program in 2019, graduating with a score of 43. She has since received offers to a number of universities, both in Australia and abroad, including the University of Oxford, where she is soon to commence a degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics. Reflecting on the nature of the program, Sandhya particularly values the balance it strikes between a breadth of knowledge, and a depth of learning, within subjects.



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Having lived most of his life in Indonesia, and now based in Melbourne, Dave is familiar with many international curricula, including the Cambridge A-Levels, Advanced Placement and the IB Diploma. Dave completed the IB Diploma program in 2019, obtaining a total score of 43. He applied to top universities in the United States, and was successfully admitted into the College of Engineering at Cornell University, where he is planning to pursue a Chemical Engineering major. Dave chose the IB Diploma over the A-Levels for its interdisciplinary curriculum and emphasis on hands-on learning and personal engagement.

# Introduction to the International Baccalaureate

The International Baccalaureate is a global curriculum split into four categories, the Primary Years program, Middle Years program, Diploma program and Career-Related program. For this guide, we will be focusing on the Diploma program taken by students aged 16-19, or in their final two years of secondary education. The International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma is one of the most academically demanding high school curriculum, alongside the Advanced Placement and Cambridge A-Levels. In addition to its rigorous academic focus, the two-year international program is also designed to equip its graduates with a holistic and perceptive worldview by encouraging inquisition, reflection, risk-taking and creativity.

In the IB Diploma, students must study six subjects, one from each of the following categories:



**Studies in language and literature**



**Studies in a second language**



**Sciences**



**Humanities**



**Mathematics**



**The arts**

Students may undertake an additional subject from groups 1 to 5 in place of a subject from group 6 if they choose. At least three of these six subjects must be undertaken at a 'Higher Level', with the remainder being studied at 'Standard Level'. Learning in these subjects are assessed over the two years through a combination of internal and external assessments. Internal assessments may take the form of oral presentations, essays and assignments, and make up between 20% to 50% of a candidate's final score in a subject. These are conducted throughout the duration of the program, though often concentrated in the later half. External assessments take the form of exams (or performances and portfolios, where relevant) and are held in May (Northern Hemisphere) and November (Southern Hemisphere).

In addition to their 6 subjects, all IB candidates must also fulfil three core requirements of the program in order to attain their Diploma, being:

### **CAS**

Complete approximately 50 hours of engagement in each of the following areas, 'creativity', 'activity' (recreation), and 'service' (community involvement).

### **Theory of Knowledge (TOK)**

Undertake a study of epistemology, culminating in an assessed oral presentation and 1,500 word essay on a set question about the nature of knowledge and knowledge acquisition.

### **Extended Essay (EE)**

Complete a 4,000 word research essay on a self-constructed topic in a subject of their choice, to be supervised by a teacher of that subject.

Graduating candidates receive a score out of 45, made up of 6 scores out of 7 for each of their subjects, totally 42, and a score out of 3 based on their performance in Theory of Knowledge and the Extended Essay.

## **The History of IB in Australia**

The IB was first taught in Australia in 1978 and the IB Diploma is now offered in 76 schools across Australia. When the IB first came to Australia, its major advantage was that it offered a curriculum in which results could be easily transferred and compared across state or country. Furthermore, because of its international recognition and reputation for being academically rigorous, schools wanted to add the IB into their system to add credibility and value. It was also marketed as the curriculum to study if students wanted to apply to competitive universities outside of Australia. It is no secret that the IB is internationally recognised, and while the IB Diploma does have some advantages for students aiming for international universities, local curriculums like the VCE or HSC are still widely accepted.



Before deciding to take the IB Diploma, you should consider several factors, most importantly about whether you can cope with the curriculum and whether it's worth it. Below, we compare the IB Diploma with the Australian ATAR system, elaborating on some of the post high school benefits of doing the Diploma and discuss what are some qualities that allows a student to excel in the Diploma program.

## Comparison between the IB and the ATAR

In Year 10, parents and students who have the option of taking the IB Diploma are busily trying to choose between the Diploma or local equivalents (e.g. VCE, HSC, etc.). This is a difficult decision as the Diploma program doesn't suit everyone but here is a quick side-by-side comparison to help you choose.

Below are some helpful questions that parents and students could ask before deciding whether or not to take the IB diploma:

- Am I interested in studying overseas?
- Am I comfortable learning a second language?
- Am I ready for the heavy academic workload?
- Am I ready to take on additional components (TOK, EE, CAS)?

	IB Diploma	ATAR
International recognition	Well recognised internationally for its academic rigour and holistic learning focus.	The ATAR system is well-known in Australia but not necessarily in other countries.
Academic flexibility	Limited flexibility – as a two year course, examinable content is taught from the beginning of Year 11. As such, changing subjects is often stressful and strongly discouraged.	Students may complete some subjects in Year 11. Switching subjects between Year 11 and 12 is possible, as only content taught in Year 12 is examinable, although Year 11 knowledge is often foundational.
Personal engagement	Emphasis on engaging with the curriculum outside the classroom in a personal and creative way (IAs, EE, etc.).	More focus on traditional learning, but students may undertake an extended research project in place of one subject.
Curriculum	A globally-minded curriculum. Certain subjects may earn you credit at certain universities.	You may study university subjects to boost your ATAR and earn credit (for Australian universities).

	IB Diploma	ATAR
Classroom environment	Collaboration and teamwork is encouraged, but there remains a focus on independent learning.	The ranking system may disincentive collaboration.
Assessment methods	Exams and internal assessments make up your final grade, with a heavier leaning on exam marks. There is a combination of both traditional examination and assignment style assessment, the former testing a breadth of knowledge and the latter a depth of understanding.	Subjects are scored based on your performance throughout the year (SACs) as well as your final exam, with an often equal weightage on the two, so there is still opportunity to do well if you struggle with exams.
Compulsory subjects	Theory of Knowledge is a compulsory subject. Students must study at least one first language, second language, maths, science and humanities subject. All subjects contribute equally to your score, except TOK and EE. You must study 6 subjects.	English is a compulsory subject, has added weightage in the ATAR calculation – it must be in the 'Top 4' subjects that contribute most significantly to your ATAR. You must complete at least 16 units (4 subjects) to graduate.

*\*Note: Some schools are still fairly new to the IB Diploma. If this is the case, make sure to chat with your IB Coordinator to get a sense of the teachers etc.*

## Global recognition

The IB Diploma is globally recognized and some students utilize its academic rigour and interdisciplinary curriculum to showcase their wide range of scholastic abilities.

Below are some estimates made by Crimson Education strategists of IB scores to stand a chance in top US universities:

 US Colleges	IB	ATAR
Harvard, Yale, Princeton, UPenn, Columbia, Cornell, Dartmouth, Brown, CalTech, Stanford, MIT, UChicago	≥41	≥99
UMichigan, Johns Hopkins, UCLA, Duke University, UC Berkeley	≥40	≥98
Vanderbilt, Rice, USC	≥39	≥97
Northwestern, NYU, UNC Chapel Hill	≥37	≥95
Carnegie Mellon, UCSD, Tufts	≥35	≥90

Bear in mind that these are approximations and will vary due to other elements on your application or the competitiveness of the courses you are applying for. Furthermore, students applying to the US must sit for the SAT and make note that IB subjects cannot be used to satisfy the SAT requirement.

In contrast to US colleges, UK universities will require you to have a certain grade, and will present you with a conditional offer. Below are some numbers regarding UK universities:

 UK Colleges	IB	ATAR
Oxford, Cambridge, Imperial	42	98.5
UCL, King's College, LSE	39	96
Manchester University	37	95
Edinburgh University, St Andrew's	36	92

In addition to submitting a personal statement, UK universities often require additional exams depending on your chosen area of study and may have an interview process.

## How the IB prepares you for life post high-school

The rigour of the IB program prepares its students for life at university and beyond. The Diploma aims to develop certain core values in students that will enable them to flourish outside the classroom. These include understanding the importance of reflection, being unafraid to take risks, evaluating the process of knowledge acquisition, and thinking with a global mindset. Further benefits of the program, in the words of its graduates, are:



### In-depth learning fosters greater intellectual curiosity

The IB is designed to let students venture beyond traditional academics and learning culture. Internal assessments provide students with the opportunity to take the theoretical knowledge taught in class and apply this to real-world scenarios. The Diploma allows you to engage with your subjects on a deeper, more personal level, and many graduates reflect on their EEs and IAs as the start of their interest in academic research.

## Continual reflection on learning and development

Students studying the IB are encouraged to constantly review and evaluate their work and progress, assessing the effectiveness of their approach to their learning. This emphasis on introspection when learning turns out to be a valuable skill when applying for universities and jobs, taking control of your learning at university, and just helping you navigate life, in general.

## CAS encourages out-of-classroom learning

CAS gives IB students a valuable push to develop their interest in a range of extracurricular activities, spanning physical recreation, creative involvement, and community engagements. This often sparks greater interest in certain non-academic pursuits, that then feature in university admissions essays, or continue to be pursued at university level.

## University credit for certain subjects

A more tangible benefit, studying subjects at a higher level often earns students credit towards the subject at university, which may then decrease the number of years they require to complete their chosen degree. Take a look at the advanced placement credit rules in the following top schools:



Stanford  
University



Cornell  
University



University of  
Notre Dame



University of  
Queensland

*\*click the names above to learn more about the advanced placement credit for each university*

## What makes a good IB student?

While there is no one model for the 'perfect' IB student, the program is well-suited to students possessing the following traits:

### A broad range of interests

Some students want to continue to study a full range of subjects, having a taste of different subject areas, from languages to sciences to humanities. The IB suits students who do not want to specialise too early (e.g. in the sciences), or even for students who are still unsure of what they want to learn after high school. To complete the full Diploma takes a lot of work, but many students state later that the academic variety of the IB prepared them well for challenging university courses.

### Good 'exam takers'

Performance in exams makes up between 45-80% of your final grade in an IB subject. These results are not moderated by your performance in your internal assessments.

## Self-driven scholars

Success in the IB requires students to take much of their learning into their own hands. The final exams that you will sit assesses two years worth of content and for many students this might be their first standardized examination, which can seem daunting! It is up to students to ensure that they are undertaking constant revision of the material throughout the course. Similarly, students are required to complete an Extended Essay (a 4000 word mini-dissertation in an area of students' choice) with limited teacher support. In addition, they are required to complete a mandatory course called Theory of Knowledge where students "reflect on the nature of knowledge, and on how we know what we claim to know".

## Excel at traditional learning system

The IB doesn't offer students the opportunity to undertake vocational-style subjects, and is known to have a fairly rigorous curriculum in most subjects – a feature that often sees it favoured by universities.

## Globally-minded individuals

As the IB is an international curriculum, you naturally learn about world events and how they relate to your academic pursuits. In contrast to national or state curriculums (e.g. VCE in Victoria), the case studies and examples that are seen in your examinations and textbooks are from around the world. For example, you can come across a text in your Chinese exam that is about pollution in Shanghai, or you may use a case study of Turkish fiscal and monetary policies for your Economics internal assessment.



# Choosing your subjects

In order to earn the IB Diploma, students must complete six subjects, one from each of the six previously outlined subject groups.

Furthermore, students must study a minimum of three of these subjects at a 'Higher Level' (HL), and the remainder at a 'Standard Level' (SL). As the name suggests, HL subjects possess an added level of difficulty, often in the form of a greater breadth of content, more difficult expansions of core topics – often at university level – and additional forms of assessment (commonly another exam). Students are expected to demonstrate a more comprehensive understanding of the subject and mastery of relevant skills when undergoing their HL subjects. As a general guideline, HL subjects are expected to be taught over 240 hours across the 2 years, compared to 150 hours for most SL subjects.

With this in mind, there are several things to consider when choosing your subjects, or determining which you will undertake as HLs.

## Examine your strong suits

Look back on previous years. Do you enjoy the sciences? Or, do you prefer learning languages? Moreover, consider the way you learn and your personality as a scholar. Are you good at learning lots of content? Do you learn best through discussion or individual study? Your academic inclinations and preferred styles of learning will give you some insight into which subjects you'd like to pursue.

## Strike a balance between following your interests and being strategic

While it's important that you choose subjects you enjoy, be aware of the difficulty of certain courses and the requirements that the subject entails. This is particularly important when choosing your HLs, as certain subjects have a more substantive increase in difficulty and workload between the levels than others. Consulting with previous graduates is a good way to get a grasp of these disparities.

With this in mind, however, don't be put off by seemingly difficult subjects as IB grading takes place on a bell curve. The IB prefers to challenge its students with difficult content, rather than encourage and reward perfection.

## Consider university prerequisites

Some universities may require that you undertake particular subjects in order to apply for certain majors, so do your research ahead of time and plan out your subjects accordingly. When choosing your higher levels, remember that you may earn college credit in these subjects; choose those that you might be inclined to pursue at university.

# Navigating the core components – EE, TOK & CAS



## **Creativity, Activity and Service (CAS)**

IB Diploma students must complete a cumulative 150 hours of ‘CAS’ activities over the course of the diploma, and reflect upon the ways these engagements have encouraged them to undertake new challenges, demonstrate initiative and consider issues of global importance, amongst other aims (see a full list of aims [here](#)).

### **1. Get started early**

Aim to complete 80-90% of your CAS requirements in Year 11, and get your CAS project out of the way early on.

### **2. The importance of planning**

Plan out your hours beforehand, making sure you have sufficient activities planned to not only meet, but exceed the outcomes required (be prepared for some of your plans to fall through). When planning out your timeline, make sure to pace yourself throughout the two years.

### **3. Make time for reflections**

Don't leave your reflections to the last minute. Set aside a regular time to write reflections (15 minutes every fortnight is a good guideline).





## **Extended Essay (EE)**

The Extended Essay is a 4,000 word research essay undertaken largely independently by students over the course of their Diploma program, with the guidance of a supervisor. This presents an excellent opportunity for students to explore an area of interest at a level beyond the scope of the course, and get familiar with the process of academic research.

### **1. Spend time carefully constructing a topic**

Scope out your ideas and think about how you'll tackle your proposed question, in detail, before committing to it – you don't want to realise you've hit a dead end midway through the process. Involve your supervisor with this choice, as they'll probably have substantial experience on what works and what doesn't. In saying this, however, it is not a bad idea to continually refine your question throughout the process, to make sure it accurately and specifically delineates the focus of your essay.

### **2. Keep your work organised**

No matter what you choose to do your EE on, you will conduct some kind of research - lots of it. Keep your notes tidy because the EE isn't a one-day thing; you're likely to spend lots of time on it. Keeping your research organized from the get-go saves you a lot of time and effort down the road. Another important part of organisation is to make sure that you're referencing sources as you go; doing so retrospectively is not easy.

### **3. Get it out of the way as soon as possible**

Although we could probably give this advice for all areas of the IB, it's perhaps most critical in relation to the EE. Getting started on your EE as soon as possible and ensuring you set your own dates for key milestones (such as the first draft) will reduce your stress significantly as the final deadline approaches, as this also coincides with the deadlines for your IAs. You don't want to be working on your EE when IAs enter the picture – complete all your research in Year 11 and have a first draft ready by the end of the summer break. You'll thank yourself later, trust us.

### **4. Make full use of your support system**

Whether it's asking the librarian for help with academic referencing or approaching your supervisor for support, remember that you are not alone! Don't be afraid to seek help from staff and utilise all available resources your school has. Your supervisors will be your first point of contact, so be proactive and ask for as much feedback as possible! Maintain regular contact with your supervisor and keep them in the loop.

### **5. Don't sleep on the reflections**

Your reflections are marked under the 'Engagement' criterion. In these, you'll want to highlight your thought process and how you tackled the EE: your brainstorming process, changes you made, mistakes you recognized, how you collected data, what you would have done differently. Note these changes down as they happen – keeping a record of this process in a document will help you when it comes to constructing the references.



## **Theory of Knowledge (TOK)**

As its name suggests, this mandatory subject encourages students to explore key questions surrounding the nature of knowledge: what constitutes knowledge, how it is acquired, and what makes it valid. Learning is assessed in the form of an oral presentation (either individually or in small groups) and an essay on a prescribed topic. This will change in 2022 when the oral presentation will be replaced by an exhibition.

### **1. Compile a list of real life situations as early as possible**

A key factor in succeeding in TOK is being able to relate the theoretical concepts to reality. So, keep up with the news and make note of any relevant events that pose knowledge points or might make for interesting discussion. This will come in handy when you have to write your TOK essay and construct your oral presentation.

### **2. Use TOK terms – all the time!**

Whether it's in your oral TOK presentation or your TOK essay, keep in mind that you want to continuously utilize jargon that is relevant to the TOK syllabus (i.e. areas of knowledge, ways of knowing, etc.). This not only showcases your understanding of the syllabus, but also enhances the clarity of your work.

### **3. Go with your gut feeling!**

You will have to make several choices during the course of your TOK study, from selecting a prompt for your TOK essay to deciding what real life situation you want to analyze in the oral presentation. Don't think about it too hard and go with what you're comfortable with! Remember, there's no one right way to do things in TOK.



# The importance of internal assessments

Internal assessments are a critical part of the Diploma program, and will contribute to a portion of your final mark in every subject, ranging from 20% to just over 50%. Doing well in your IAs is imperative to success in the Diploma program, as is a good way to mitigate against any possible exam 'mess-ups'; here are a few of our best tips to help you secure as many marks as you can toward your final score before exams roll around.

## Start as soon as possible

It's never too early to start brainstorming! Start thinking of topics and ideas early (ideally Year 11!). Keep in mind a 'bad' topic can jeopardise your IA mark, so make sure you leave yourself enough time to scope out a topic, that will enable you to demonstrate a level of understanding commensurate with the course. Think of your IAs as mini-EEs! They have to be elaborate and sophisticated, but realistic and practical.

## Make your first draft count

Your teacher is only allowed to provide you with written feedback on one draft, so make sure that this is one that reflects the best of your abilities. In saying this, however, don't be afraid to discuss any questions that you have with your teacher throughout the process – you're not alone here.

## Keep things in perspective

Your IA is not expected to win you a Nobel prize. While passion and genuine interest in your work is critical to success in the IAs, remember that they are typically worth around 20% of your final mark. Don't allow it to take away too much time from your exam study or cause you to fall behind on content.



# Getting exam ready

For most of the IB subjects, the final external assessment that students do at the end of their two years will carry the greatest percentage in their final results. Many students may have never sat for a standardized examination before this, so it is a good idea to start familiarizing yourself with exam-like conditions and how to deal with it. The assessments are likely to have more than one component, and they all will assess your knowledge and skills that you developed throughout the entire Diploma program. So, below are some tips and advice on how to prepare yourself and become exam ready.

## Familiarity with content

As you near the end of the two-year program, it's likely that you're a little rusty on particular areas of the course. Use the syllabus as a checklist to ensure that you're familiar with all key aspects of the curriculum, revisiting your notes and textbooks if there are any significant gaps.

*Head-start! >>> Be sure to write topic summaries as you cover the content in class, so that you have a succinct resources to revert to as exams near.*

## Understanding question styles and formats

Once you're familiar with around 70% of the content (yes, just 70%), it's time to start attempting past paper questions. Don't worry if you're not an expert on the subject just yet, as completing past papers will give you a good idea of what you know and what still requires revision. Once you feel comfortable, start doing full papers under time constraints. In this way, you not only become familiar with common styles of questions, but also build up 'exam endurance', accustoming yourself to concentrating for long periods of time, and develop strategies to manage your allocated time.

*Head-start! >>> The best students begin attempting questions from past papers long before they've completed the course. Many online resources make past exam questions viewable in a 'by topic' format, so you can attempt these over the two years as you cover topics, familiarising yourself with question styles.*

## Think like an examiner

This is arguably the most important stage in the revision process. Once you've completed past papers, ensure that you mark these against the mark schemes, available online or from your teachers, to really understand what examiners are looking for. Familiarise yourself with key phrases examiners look for in answer, where these exist, and make sure you include these. For essay-based papers, have a go at assessing your own or a friend's work against the criteria – really get into the shoes of an examiner!

## Address your weaknesses and fine tune your skills

There comes a point when completing past papers is no longer the most efficient way to maximise your learning. You'll begin to realise this when the same mistakes begin to show up over again, or if you feel that the quality of your work isn't improving over multiple sessions.

For example, if your economics essays contain eloquent definitions, accurate and appropriate diagrams, cogent explanations and insightful evaluations, but you struggle to include relevant examples, it might be time to put your pen down and start compiling a list of case studies.



## Studying during the exam period

With an exam period spanning nearly 3 weeks, and upwards of 15 exams for most students, the prospect of studying during the exam might seem like a surefire way to achieve burnout right at the very end of your IB journey. However, it's also critical that you continue to revise during this period, so to not undo your hard work. Complete small, 'low-intensity' revision sessions, such as planning an English essay for 15 minutes or practising Biology definitions on Quizlet, that keep content fresh without tiring you out.

**Head-start! >>> Prepare Quizlets and other forms of on-the-go revision earlier in the year, and use them to revise while commuting.**

# A few 'Do's' and 'Don'ts'!

## ✓ Do collaborate!

The IB is one of few high-school curricula where your academic success doesn't come at the expense of someone else's. The fact that IB scores are not directly derived from rankings means that collaborative study can work to your advantage. Regular get-togethers with a focused study group are not only a good way to provide yourself with a much needed break from individual study, but allow you to benefit from others' ideas, strengthen your understanding through peer-teaching, and consolidate weak areas. When studying in groups, ensure productivity by setting meeting agendas beforehand, taking regular timed breaks, choosing to meet with people you work well with, and limiting meeting size (five is a good number).

## ✓ Do practise handwriting essays – to time constraints!

As elementary as it may seem, many students underestimate the importance of not only practising handwriting essays, but doing so under time constraints. There's nothing worse than knowing that you would've liked to write more than you did, which makes maintaining the ability to write quickly is tantamount to your exam success.

## ✗ Don't rely on your teachers to tell you all that you need to know

Take control of your learning by familiarising yourself with the syllabus (readily available online) and know what you need to know. This will allow you to fill in any gaps missed in class, or get ahead with content if you feel that the classroom pace will not leave you sufficient time for revision – it happens! Furthermore, find the resources that work best for you, not necessarily the ones your school provides. This includes exploring different textbooks, study guides and even YouTube channels!

## ✗ Don't burn yourself out

Yes, the IBDP program is a rigorous and tasking experience, but you don't have to sacrifice your life for it. Save some time for sports, music, debate and other extracurricular activities and make sure you get enough sleep! The one thing you need to succeed in the IB - no matter what subjects you do - is time management.

## Helpful links

Listed below are some websites for you to learn more about the IB Diploma:

[IB Website](#)

[IB Schools in Australia](#)

[IB School Finder](#)

[Pros & Cons of the IB](#)

[IB to ATAR Score Conversation](#)

# Alternatives to the IB / ATAR

If you're looking for something different altogether, consider Advanced Placement and Cambridge subjects.

Advanced Placement (AP) is an academic program created by the College Board that offers college-level curricula to high school students. More popular with American students and international schools, it is quite similar to VCE or HSC courses in the sense that it is a one-year course. If you are considering studying in the US, seriously consider taking AP exams because they are very popular among US colleges and usually can be transferred for college credit.

Another international curriculum is the Cambridge International AS and A Levels. Students can do these Cambridge subjects through the Crimson Global Academy. AS level examinations cover one year worth of content, while A level ones cover two years worth. The main difference between the A level curriculum and the IB Diploma is the amount of personal engagement. While the IB Diploma encourages students to take initiative in implementing what they learn in class in real-life scenarios, A level subjects emphasizes greater importance in learning the theoretical foundations of the subject.

Studying these globally recognised curricula can be particularly helpful if you aim to apply to overseas universities as it will increase and strengthen your academic profile. To learn more about Crimson Global Academy, US and UK university applications or IB tutoring, request a free consultation on the Crimson Education website.

## Final thoughts...

We hope this guide helps you to make an informed choice. If you're already an IB student or parent of an IB student, keep engaging with the IB student community and making the most of your diverse options after school.



*This guide was written by Crimson Education. For more information or free resources about going from Australia to the US or UK, visit:*

**CRIMSONEDUCATION.ORG**



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