

GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE

UNIVERSITY



US universities such as Harvard (pictured) may be more used to accepting students with American high school qualifications, but those institutions interested in recruiting the best and brightest from abroad have grown increasingly switched on to gauging student potential based on applications from different systems. Photo: AP Photo

CURRICULAR CONSIDERATIONS

From the IB to AP and A-levels, a curriculum's suitability for a secondary school student depends on factors ranging from learning style to academic strengths, writes **Jacqueline Kot**

Every milestone stage of a child's education journey is significant in its own way and comes with its own unique set of points to consider. For young people progressing to tertiary education, the senior years at secondary school are crucial, as these will determine where they go to university and what subject or subjects they will study. It is a pivotal time that pushes students towards what they hope to achieve in their lives and careers.

When it comes to young people at international schools with ambitions of studying abroad, a range of application procedures apply in different countries and at various universities. There is always a worry that, for example, an American university may be hesitant to offer a place to a student who has studied an unfamiliar curriculum.

When it comes to the secondary school curricula offered at international schools across Hong Kong, the International Baccalaureate (IB) programme is now the most common. Other programmes such as A-levels and Advanced Placement (AP) are available at certain schools but are more niche than before IB gained ascendancy.

The curriculum is obviously a significant factor when considering which school to send your child to, particularly with regards to older students and university considerations. Ruth Benny, founder of Top Schools Asia, a Hong Kong-based consultancy that specialises in education, advises parents not to make it the key deciding factor from the get-go, however.

"We meet parents of very young children, apparently guided by the fact they 'might' send their children to the



British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has said he would like pupils in the UK to study English and mathematics through to the final year of secondary school. Photo: AP Photo

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DR DAVID BUTLER, CANADIAN
INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL OF HONG KONG

US for grade nine, or the UK for year nine. That's years away and, in my view, not an important factor in choosing a school for now," she said. "Our clients are generally seeking a well-established school with a proven track record, and a good brand. Restricting choice further to one curriculum means they'd likely be eliminating good-fit options without realising."

Furthermore, universities around the world have become increasingly adept at reviewing students who have studied a different curriculum than the one dominant in the institution's home country.

"Universities are understandably more familiar with their own national curricula and grading conventions, but the word is out regarding other international options. Universities seeking to recruit the best and brightest graduates from abroad are increasingly savvy in comparing apples and oranges as they receive applications from different systems and gauge student potential," said Dr David Butler, upper school principal at the Canadian International School of Hong Kong (CDNIS).

So, how do the main secondary school curriculum options in Hong Kong compare when it comes to considering higher education?

The IB is a through-train programme that starts with the Primary Years Programme, followed by the Middle Years Programme. Students studying the IB programme up to graduation will move on to the IB Diploma Programme (IBDP) or IB Career-related Programme during their final two years of school.

The IBDP is an all-encompassing, holistic and well-rounded programme. Unlike curriculum programmes that allow students to focus on specific subjects and disciplines, the IBDP mandates that students choose subjects from six subject groups, meaning that all students are enrolled in maths, science and language in their last two years of school. In addition to the six subjects, there is the DP core, which sees students participate in "creativity, activity and service" (CAS) experiences or projects, complete a 4,000-word extended essay, and take on a theory of knowledge course.

"All of these elements must be approached through an internationalist lens in pursuit of the IB's mission to create a better world through education," said Butler. "When a student joins the IBDP, they are committed to the entire package."

The IBDP is also known for its rigour. Butler added that CDNIS graduates asked to provide feedback commented that the programme was effective in getting them to develop discipline in their studies as well as good time management skills.

"The challenging nature of IB assessments invites students to become effective interpreters of questions, prompts and rubrics," Butler affirmed. "As they transition to university, they find themselves exceeding their classmates in fulfilling the requirements of assigned tasks."

Also a two-year programme, A-levels – the shortened, widely used term for Advanced Levels – is part of the UK's national curriculum. Students choose



three or four subjects, with an extensive range of subjects available – although the courses on offer depend on the school in question.

A-levels differs from the IBDP in that students can focus on fewer subjects, choosing according to their preferences or with university applications in mind. For students with a clear path in mind, the A-levels programme allows them to focus on their strengths. In this way, young people can concentrate on their chosen field and have a better chance of excelling at it.

Compared to the IBDP, there is more emphasis on the final exam in the A-levels programme, but some subjects' final assessments are based on coursework as well as exams.

"A-levels are perfect for a child who is stronger in sciences, or humanities and the arts, and is fairly certain about which path they want to pursue for higher education," said Benny. "Some A-levels do have a fair amount of coursework, so it's incorrect to say they are purely graded on exams," she continued – adding that A-levels can also be taken alongside AS-levels (half an A-level, with the 'S' standing for "Subsidiary"), career-based BTEC (Business and Technology Education Council) qualifications, and IB or AP courses.

It may be worth noting that, in September 2023, UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak announced a proposal to shake up the A-levels programme and create a new Advanced British Standard, comprising five subjects instead of three. The new plan, if it goes ahead, would make it mandatory for young people to study maths and English up to the end of school.

The AP programme, created by the US's College Board, offers university-level courses designed for high school students. The final grade is based on the AP exam that students sit at the end of the school year. AP courses are offered from grade nine onwards, giving students exposure to higher-level studies from a younger age.

Furthermore, students can receive college credit or fulfil certain course requirements for their first year at university through AP courses studied at high school, provided they achieve the required score. This can save a significant amount of time for students, potentially enabling them to graduate a semester early. The AP also stands out for the wide range of choices it offers to students.

"One of the advantages of the AP programme is that students can select which courses they want to study at an advanced level," said Carrie Bennett, high school associate principal at Hong Kong International School (HKIS), adding, "Unlike with the IB, where there is a

prescribed study plan, AP students have more choices in their academic portfolio. They can follow a path of study that includes AP courses as well as regular high school ones, depending on the subject area."

"Students who want to have more choice might choose the AP, while students who would like a more prescribed programme might choose the IB," said Jason Holly, high school counsellor at HKIS.

"AP and the IB are recognised in North America and Europe. IB is the more common programme if applying to European universities."

At CDNIS, the standard curriculum sees students work towards the Ontario Secondary School Diploma within the framework of the IB programme, providing a unique opportunity to graduate with both diplomas.

"This affords graduates an advantage since they can apply to university programmes using both sets of grades. Some universities may favour one system over another, so being able to apply with both diplomas can generate more opportunities," said Butler.

In addition to the IB and IGCSE programmes offered through its English international stream, German Swiss International School (GSIS) offers the Deutsches Internationales Abitur curriculum through its German international stream.

"The German international stream offers a distinctive curriculum that sets it apart from other educational options. With a strong emphasis on mathematics and sciences, the programme introduces biology, chemistry and physics from lower secondary, providing students with a solid foundation in these critical subjects," explained Udo Krebs, head of German secondary at the school.

Ultimately, choosing the right curriculum involves considering how each student learns best, where their individual strengths lie, and – if they are considering tertiary education – whether they have strong ideas about what they want to pursue at university.

"It is important for pupils to carefully consider their individual goals, interests and learning styles when choosing the right curriculum. For instance, if a pupil finds it challenging to narrow down their options to three A-levels or is unsure about their future field of study, the International Baccalaureate may be worth considering, as it offers a broader range of subjects," said Laura Yandell, principal deputy head (curricular) at Harrow International School Hong Kong. "However, for pupils who have a clear career path and know exactly what they want to study, specialising in that subject through A-levels may be the best choice."

Studying at a local university may be the more affordable option, but many children at Hong Kong's international schools have their hearts set on going to the UK, US or Australia.

Photo: Eugene Lee