

# life

## The International Baccalaureate journey

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**MISSONIA WONG**, from Anglo-Chinese School (Independent)'s International Baccalaureate class of 2019, was drawn to the IB programme's structure of allowing students to secure grades through various projects even before sitting the final exam

ST PHOTO: SAMUEL ANG



# A levels v IB diploma

## – which suits your child better?

**While both qualifications are globally recognised for university admission, their curriculum structure and assessment format are different**



Jane Ng

When the first batch of Anglo-Chinese School (Independent) students sat the International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma examinations in 2007, their results were comparable with those of the best schools globally.

Nine students received the perfect score of 45, making up almost half of 20 candidates around the world with that score.

ACS(I) was the first national school to offer the IB in place of the A levels at the junior college level.

There are now three other national schools that offer the IB diploma – St Joseph's Institution (SJI), School of the Arts and the Singapore Sports School.

Fifteen years after the first batch of candidates sat their exams,

students from Singapore are still outperforming those from around the world.

The latest results from the IB exam in November saw Singapore produce more than half the perfect scorers globally, or 133 out of 238 students. The average score for Singapore was 40.6 out of 45, higher than the Asia-Pacific average of 37.02 and global average of 32.37.

ACS(I) alumnus Joshua Chai, 19, who scored 44 points in last year's IB exams, loved the freedom to explore topics he was interested in. He is waiting for his national service enlistment.

"We could see how the concepts we learnt in the classroom applied in the real world, building our understanding of those concepts," said Mr Chai, who analysed former United States president Donald Trump's speeches for his extended essay.

"I was able to see how political language features I had learnt about were applicable in real life," said Mr Chai, who intends to study social work and sociology.

A Ministry of Education (MOE) spokesman said the IB diploma curriculum was introduced in Singapore to add diversity and provide multiple education pathways to develop students according to their learning profiles, strengths and interests.

The IB curriculum's emphasis on

community service is also aligned to Singapore's educational philosophy, she added.

MOE said that both the A-level and IB diploma programmes "are internationally benchmarked qualifications for university admission".

"All qualifications are assessed equally rigorously during the admission process, with no qualification accorded any advantage," said its spokesman.

When asked how the IB score is calculated for university admission, a National University of Singapore (NUS) spokesman referred to the Frequently Asked Questions section on admission on its website which said it will use the IB score to evaluate the students, without giving further details.

It may also consider "achievements that demonstrate exceptional ability in an area, exceptional achievements in research projects and various CCAs".

According to the IB Organisation, each university has its own admission requirements for accepting students, depending on the academic merit, IB results and course.

IB graduates enter a wide range of courses such as medicine, engineering and law in leading universities, its spokesman added.

CONSISTENT WORK NEEDED FOR IB ASSESSMENTS continued on C2



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**ANGLO-CHINESE SCHOOL (INDEPENDENT) ALUMNUS JOSHUA CHAI**, who analysed former United States president Donald Trump's speeches for his extended essay as part of the International Baccalaureate diploma programme

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SAMUEL ANG,  
THADDEUS ANG

## Consistent work needed for IB assessments

FROM C1

Both qualifications are internationally recognised for university admission, but are different in how the curriculum is structured and assessed.

SJI's dean of the IB Academy Tang Woh Un said that with IB assessments conducted over a two-year period, students need to put in consistent work throughout.

"Students need to be self-regulated and have good time management to keep up with the deadlines as the marks for these assignments contribute to their final grade," he said.

ACS(I) principal Arene Koh added that students who are self-motivated and take ownership of their learning will enjoy the IB experience.

"Consistent hard work and a keenness to acquire new skills and competencies across a broad range of subjects and beyond the classroom will help students to thrive," he said.

It was the thought of being able to secure grades through various projects even before sitting the final exam that led Miss Sonia Wong, 21, now a second-year NUS dentistry student, to pick the IB.

Miss Wong, who was from the 2019 IB class at ACS(I), said: "I did not want to take a programme where my entire grade would depend on just written examinations. Consistent effort was something I was good at."

But some students preferred not to be assessed over two years.

Second-year Victoria Junior College (VJC) student David Tan, 18, who considered both programmes, felt that picking the A levels would

give him more time to be involved in activities outside school.

"I would likely be unable to try other activities outside of school, such as writing, internships or joining competitions with friends from the polytechnic if I opted for the IB," he said.

### PREPARATION FOR UNIVERSITY

VJC principal Jeffrey Low said the A-level curriculum aims to nurture competencies such as critical and inventive thinking, cross-cultural awareness, communication and collaboration skills, to prepare students for university.

Students also take part in student-led special interest groups and talent development programmes in VJC. "These would put them in good stead not just for aptitude-based admission to university, but also life beyond their studies," he added.

In the IB programme, Creativity, Activity and Service is one of the core elements.

ACS(I)'s Mr Koh said this requirement provides a counterbalance to the academic pursuits of the IB, for instance, through musical productions, sports or community service activities.

"Students should, through these activities, develop greater awareness of themselves and concern for others, and the ability to work well with other people," he said.

Students said the IB prepared them for more than university education.

SJI alumna Natalie Chong, 19, said the IB programme taught her to take risks.

Even though she failed a mathematics diagnostic test and was discouraged from taking the subject

at a higher level, she decided to give it a shot anyway. She struggled with the subject initially, but pushed herself to keep trying.

"Maths became really fun with a lot of discussions. We talked about so many approaches to the same questions. I never thought we would have such rich discussions for a subject like maths," she said.

She did an extended essay for economics where she came up with her own research questions, interviewed people, collected data and analysed it.

"The experience was special to me because it was a piece of work that I owned. I created my own work, exploring my subjects in greater depth. This increased my confidence in asking questions and participating in discussions. It is different from secondary school where we just took tests," said Miss Chong, who hopes to study economics.

Miss Wong said the presentations for her literature and Theory of Knowledge (TOK) classes helped her to be a good communicator. "In dentistry, this is particularly useful as I have to communicate with patients and collaborate with them on a treatment plan," she said.

She added that doing a reflection after every activity in the IB programme trained her not just for the next academic phase, but also for life.

"Back then, I sometimes thought it was a chore, but I can now appreciate the value that critical reflection can bring to my life.

"This helped me know myself better and discover ways I could support my own personal development," she said.

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**ST JOSEPH'S INSTITUTION ALUMNA NATALIE CHONG**, who did an extended essay on economics for her IB diploma course

## A levels and IB diploma: The differences

### ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

One difference between the IB and the A-level exams is the way students are assessed.

Students who take the A levels are assessed through written examinations, although there is project work that requires students to work in groups of four to five over 28 weeks to address real-world issues of their choice.

Some subjects such as knowledge and inquiry, and theatre studies and drama,

include coursework.

On the other hand, the IB final exams account for 70 to 80 per cent of the total marks for each subject while internal assessments throughout the two-year period contribute to the remaining 20 to 30 per cent of the final grade.

Internal assessment includes fieldwork, laboratory work or artistic performances.

### CURRICULUM

Both the A-level and IB curricula offer subjects in the domains of languages, mathematics, science, humanities and the arts.

For A levels, students also take General Paper or knowledge and inquiry, and project work.

They are also involved in non-academic activities such as character and citizenship education and the values in action programme.

In addition to the main

subjects, IB has three core elements: Theory of Knowledge (TOK), Creativity, Activity, and Service, and the extended essay.

The extended essay is a 4,000-word paper where students pick a topic to do research on.

TOK challenges students to question the nature of knowledge across disciplines.

Creativity, Activity, and Service sees students undertake a project that often involves community service.