A-level blow as Baccalaureate given same rating as 5 A grades

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The credibility of A-levels received a fresh blow after it emerged that an alternative sixth form qualification is academically superior.

The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (Ucas) has developed a new tariff system which gives the International Baccalaureate an A-level equivalence for the first time.

An IB score of 38 points out of a maximum of 45 - which is achieved by more than 200 pupils a year at Sevenoaks School in Kent alone - is deemed to be equivalent to a staggering five A grades at A-level.

Oxford and Cambridge typically ask for 40 points which equates to five-and-half A grades.

A relatively modest IB score of 35 points is worth four-and-a-half A grades at A-level.

Even 30 IB points reflects three-and-a-half As at A-level which is enough to secure entry to most academically selective universities. And an IB pass is worth two As, according to the tariff being introduced in 2008.

A report by Ucas justifies the huge number of points credited to the top end of the IB, claiming that "it is not the fault of an IB candidate (...) that the assessment system for GCE A-level does not recognise the difference between a good pass and a bare pass at grade A".

The new tariff will raise the prominence of the IB - which requires pupils to study both the humanities and the sciences - and provide a further nail in the coffin of A-levels.

A-levels 'dumbed down'

It demonstrates that the "gold standard" of A-levels has been dumbed down to such an extent that pupils now have to collect huge numbers just to achieve the same level as an IB.

Tory education spokesman David Willetts said: "This shows why people are losing confidence in the standard of A-level. The IB does seem to offer a rigour that is hard to get from A-levels now.

"It's important that children have the opportunity to do the IB as well as doing A-levels if that suits them better."

IB pupils typically study six subjects in the sixth form which include English and maths, a foreign language, a science, a social science such as history or geography and a creative subject such as drama or art.

They must also write a 4,000-word extended essay, pursue critical thinking courses and extra-curricular activities such as volunteering, Duke of Edinburgh awards and music lessons.

Rising numbers of state and independent schools are already turning their backs on A-levels amid rising concern over standards and taking up the IB.

Many believe that A-levels are no longer sufficiently stretching for the brightest pupils, leading to university admissions tutors being inundated with straight "A" applicants.

They are phasing in the IB along with A-levels while others aim to offer it as their sole sixth form qualification.

The number of state and independent schools registering to teach the IB in the United Kingdom has almost doubled from 45 in 2001 to 87 this year.
However numbers are expected to soar to 200 over the next few years due to the growing number of schools expressing interest to the International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO).

But Dr John Dunford, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, insisted that A-levels are here to stay.

Referring to the new IB tariff system, he said: "It could either make schools want to do them (IB's) more because they count for so many points or it could put schools off doing the IB because it suggests they're so difficult."