

*International GCSEs,
AS and A-levels from OxfordAQA*

A guide for parents



At OxfordAQA
we put fairness first

OxfordAQA, the international exam board that puts fairness first

For many parents whose children study at an international school, the decision around which International GCSEs and A-levels to study isn't just limited to subject choices. Parents may also be consulted on the school's preference of qualification providers.

This guide explores the various considerations for schools and parents as they decide which qualifications to choose. It introduces OxfordAQA's International GCSEs, AS and A-levels and shows why having a choice of quality qualification providers is so beneficial to schools and students.

“

Benchmarked to UK standards, OxfordAQA exams only ever test subject ability, not language skills or cultural knowledge. This gives every student the best possible chance to show what they can do and get the results they deserve.”

Jamie Kirkaldy, Head of Teaching and Learning Support



An introduction to the different awarding bodies

If your child's school is in the Middle East, the Gulf, East Asia or South East Asia, there are three International GCSE, AS and A-level providers to choose from for the popular subjects. They are:

- OxfordAQA
- Cambridge Assessment International Education
- Pearson Edexcel

There are also other exam boards providing GCSEs and A-levels for schools in the UK, which are sometimes offered by international schools. These are AQA, OCR, Pearson Edexcel, WJEC and the CCEA.

Most international schools prefer International GCSEs and A-levels because exams tend to be timed more conveniently and the content is specially designed to be better suited to students studying outside the UK.

About OxfordAQA

OxfordAQA is a partnership between Oxford University Press, a department of the University of Oxford, and AQA, by far the UK's largest provider of GCSEs and A-levels.

AQA is the awarding body for OxfordAQA's international qualifications, which means our assessments are designed, marked and processed using the same systems that AQA uses for its popular UK exams. AQA's qualifications are taught in almost all of England's 6,000 schools and colleges, and AQA marks over 7 million exam papers every year.

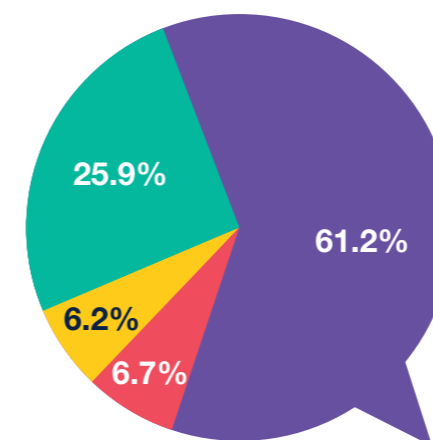
OxfordAQA's international qualifications are based on the reformed GCSEs and A-levels taught in the UK. They have been adapted to meet the needs of international students, and the exams are scheduled conveniently for students based in the Middle East, the Gulf, East Asia and South East Asia.

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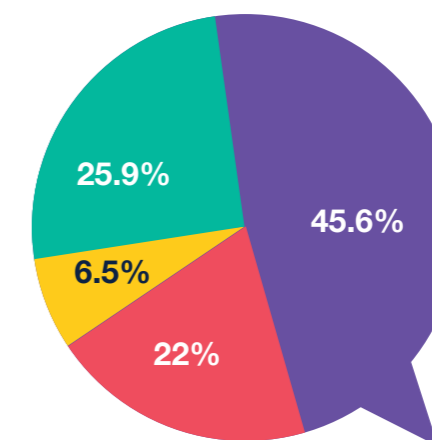
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Market share in England

GCSE



AS/A-level



- AQA
- Pearson Edexcel
- Cambridge Assessment (OCR)
- Other

Source: Ofqual

Deciding on an exam board

Schools don't have to use just one exam board across all subjects. They can pick and choose qualification providers on a subject-by-subject basis.

The decision will largely be based on the school's preferences in syllabus and exam approach. Below are seven considerations for schools when choosing qualification providers, with an explanation of the approaches taken by OxfordAQA.



1. What grading system do you prefer?

Some International GCSEs are based on the reformed GCSEs that are taught in England and graded 9–1. However, some boards still offer International GCSEs based on the old GCSEs which were graded A*–G and phased out in England as part of the 2015 exam reforms.

OxfordAQA International GCSEs are based on the reformed GCSEs, which means they are aligned to the standard of the GCSEs that students in England are taking. The 2015 exam reforms in England placed a much greater emphasis on higher level, critical thinking skills, and also introduced the 9–1 grading system.

The 9–1 grading system was designed to measure student performance against this higher standard, whilst allowing for the revised standard to be benchmarked to the old.

So a Grade 7 is comparable to a Grade A and a Grade 4 is comparable to a Grade C. With more questions targeting higher ability students, the reformed International GCSEs give students the opportunity to demonstrate higher levels of ability, with an 'exceptional' Grade 9, higher than the old A*.

The opportunity to achieve a Grade 9 enables applicants to stand out from the crowd as competition for places at top-ranking universities increases. This is even more important now that A-levels in England are 'linear' and universities are increasingly using GCSEs as evidence of a student's prior attainment.

2. Modular or linear A-levels?

International schools can choose whether to offer the reformed 'linear' A-levels from the five UK exam boards, or stick with the 'modular' approach retained by International A-levels.

Linear means that all exams will be taken at the end of the two years (or one year for AS), and are the only things that impact a student's final grade.

Modular means that the final AS and A-level grade is made up of several sections or modules that can be taken throughout the course.

The modular approach gives students the option to drop a subject after Year 1 and still achieve an AS qualification. This means students can start with four or five A-levels with a view to completing the three they are strongest in, whilst also achieving a universally recognised AS qualification for those they discontinue. The flexibility of the modular approach is preferable for many schools and students.

OxfordAQA International AS and A-levels are modular. We also allow students to retake single papers as many times as they wish, so if students miss out on a preferred grade, they can retake the paper they performed weakest in rather than the full qualification, which would be required for linear qualifications.

Seven things to consider *when* choosing a qualification provider.



3. Does the syllabus content suit you?

The syllabuses of qualifications are generally similar across all three international exam boards, but there are some differences.

OxfordAQA's syllabuses are informed by the curriculum reforms implemented in England, so there's an appropriate alignment between the curriculum your child will study and the curriculum followed by students in the UK. This alignment to the reformed curriculum also makes for a more up-to-date and relevant syllabus. For example, our International GCSEs in Science include fresh units on Space Physics, Animal Behaviour and Nanoparticles – topics that will excite students because they offer a grounding in the latest scientific principles.

However, not all of the changes to GCSE content in England suit students studying in international schools, so we have made modifications where appropriate. For example, contextual problem solving is now a compulsory component for all Mathematics GCSEs in England, but exam questions that test performance in this way may disadvantage students whose first language is not English. That is why it is not included in our International GCSE. Similarly our international English Literature qualifications do not require students to study Shakespeare, as is compulsory in England.

By taking the best of the UK curriculum reforms whilst understanding the needs of students studying internationally, we have ensured our syllabus content is globally relevant, motivating for students and excellent preparation for onward progression.

4. How flexible is the qualification?

Some qualifications allow schools to choose assessment units, such as coursework or exam.

Coursework allows students to explore an area of the subject in greater depth, and we believe that's particularly important for a subject like English. That's why OxfordAQA's English Language and English Literature qualifications allow schools to offer coursework at both International GCSE and A-level. This is not the case for GCSEs and A-levels in England, or for some other International A-levels.

For International A-level Mathematics, students have different options for exam papers, allowing them to choose a specialised area of study. Our approach to optionality in Mathematics reflects the preferences of higher education. Top British universities want students to have a thorough grounding in Pure Maths and an essential grounding in both Statistics and Mechanics before specialising in one preferred option – so this is how we have structured our International A-level. Our International GCSE Combined Science qualification also allows a tiered approach, with Core and Extension papers available to choose from.

5. Is your school focused on future skills?

Schools are increasingly looking to integrate project-based learning into their curriculum to better prepare their students with skills for the future.

With OxfordAQA your child can undertake an accredited independent project alongside their International GCSEs or A-levels to develop important transferable academic skills such as problem solving, creativity, research and critical thinking.

The [International IPQ](#) is an international version of AQA's highly successful Extended Project Qualification (EPQ). Worth half an A-level, the International IPQ can be taken as a supplementary course to your child's three desired A-levels, requiring students to produce a project on a subject of their choice, underpinned by a syllabus of taught academic skills. The qualification is widely recognised by UK universities as being excellent preparation for higher education. Research in the UK has also revealed that doing an extended project alongside A-levels can increase the chances of students achieving [higher A-level grades in most subjects](#).

At GCSE level, [International GCSE Plus](#) gives students the option to undertake a mini project alongside the OxfordAQA International GCSEs they are studying. The process is similar to the IPQ; students complete a research-based piece of analytic work, directed by a short syllabus of academic skills. Successful students achieve a Pass, Merit or Distinction endorsement on their International GCSE certificate, alongside their standard grade.



Research in the UK has revealed that doing an extended project alongside A-levels can increase the chances of students achieving higher A-level grades in most subjects.



Both the International IPQ and International GCSE Plus equip children with the skills they need to thrive when they get to university, where they are expected to study independently, think critically and link ideas between different disciplines.

6. Are the exams accessible?

An exam board's qualification is made up of:

- **The syllabus** – which is taught
- **The assessment** – which provides evidence of what a student knows, understands and can do

Years of research goes into the development of exam papers to ensure assessments measure students' performance as accurately and consistently as possible. After all, their futures depend on them getting the results they deserve. That's why exam paper design has become a science in its own right, and OxfordAQA is continuously innovating and incorporating emerging best practice.

Our Fair Assessment approach

For an assessment to be fair, it must:

- Measure a student's ability in the subject they have studied
- Effectively differentiate student performance
- Ensure no student is disadvantaged, including those who speak English as a second language
- Give all students the same opportunity to achieve the right grade, irrespective of which exam series they take or which examiner marks their paper

To ensure our exams are fair, we apply three core principles when we design our assessments. They are **validity, reliability and comparability**. Find out more about [Fair Assessment](#)

The fairness of an exam can make the difference between students getting the grade they deserve and a grade that does not reflect their knowledge and skills. That difference can be life changing.

Our exam papers draw on over 100 years of assessment expertise from AQA. So much so, that every tiny aspect of an exam paper is considered and reviewed, from the precise wording of exam questions to the mark scheme that examiners use to judge performance.

Oxford 3000™
OxfordAQA draws on expertise and linguistic research from Oxford University Press when designing the international exam papers.

Exam writers use the [Oxford 3000](#) – a list of the most important words to learn in English – to ensure the language and examples used in exam questions don't disadvantage students who have never lived in the UK or who aren't fluent English speakers.



Universities and industry leaders are pushing for students to be better at applying *critical thinking skills*.

OxfordAQA's exam papers draw on over 100 years of assessment expertise from AQA, the UK's largest academic awarding body.



7. How are the assessment objectives weighted?

Assessment Objectives, or 'AOs', set out the types of skills that will be assessed in the exams, and therefore direct the style of the teaching. AO weightings usually vary between subjects. They can also vary between the different exam boards for the same subjects.

Generally speaking, OxfordAQA qualifications have more emphasis on 'higher order' thinking skills in their AOs, such as application, analysis and evaluation.

Universities and industry leaders are pushing for students to be better at applying these critical thinking skills. Top universities often require their Mathematics, Computing and Physics applicants to sit a university entrance exam such as the STEP or MAT.

These exams ask students to solve challenging, unstructured mathematical problems. Clearly, students who have studied International GCSEs and A-levels that prioritise higher order thinking skills will be at an advantage.

School leaders are also well aware that the jobs of tomorrow may not require the same skills as the jobs of today. In an age where artificial intelligence is advancing at an unprecedented rate, the ability to synthesise and evaluate ideas is likely to become an increasingly attractive skill to employers as automation gradually replaces some aspects of traditional 'knowledge'-based responsibilities.

Recognition of OxfordAQA qualifications

One of the most important aspects of any qualification is how it is recognised by higher education institutions and employers.

All OxfordAQA International GCSEs and A-levels are evaluated by UK ENIC, the government agency responsible for ensuring qualifications are comparable and offering advice on international qualifications to universities. UK ENIC has approved OxfordAQA International GCSEs, AS and A-levels as being comparable to the reformed GCSEs and A-levels offered in England.

Students with OxfordAQA qualifications have progressed to hundreds of universities all around the world, including the majority of the top 100 universities ranked by QS[®], such as the British Russell Group, the American Ivy League and the Australian Group of Eight. They also include top-ranked international universities in Canada, Europe and Asia.

The QS[®] World University Rankings portfolio is the world's most popular source of comparative data about university performance.

Every year, hundreds of thousands of UK school-leavers enrol in top global universities with AQA certificates.

Since AQA is the awarding body for all OxfordAQA qualifications, you can feel confident that your child's certificate will carry the same weight as the AQA certificates valued by school-leavers in the UK.

In some countries, the Ministry of Education formally recognises international qualifications, providing guidance for public university admissions. Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait and Malaysia are a few countries where this is the case and where OxfordAQA qualifications are officially accepted.

You can [contact us](#) to check if a particular university accepts OxfordAQA qualifications. However, rest assured that the vast majority of universities around the world accept International A-levels, and therefore accept OxfordAQA qualifications. So even if a university hasn't yet advanced through our recognition process, your child can still apply there with confidence.

Students with OxfordAQA qualifications have progressed to top universities around the world, including Oxford University and Yale and many popular universities in Asia.

*Our qualifications are recognised by the majority of the top 100 universities ranked by QS[®], including the **British Russell Group, the American Ivy League and the Australian Group of Eight.***



At OxfordAQA
we put fairness first

OxfordAQA is the international exam board that puts fairness first, giving every student the best possible chance to get the results they deserve.

We are a partnership between Oxford University Press, a department of the University of Oxford, and AQA, the UK's largest academic awarding body.



For more information about OxfordAQA,
visit [oxfordaqa.com](https://www.oxfordaqa.com)