

Update
December 2009

Universities welcome Cambridge Pre-U applications

Cambridge Pre-U students who started their courses in September 2008 are now applying to universities through the UCAS application system, and many have already begun to receive offers. Several universities had already indicated how they would apply the Cambridge Pre-U grading system to their own offers to applicants, and so far the offers reflect a good understanding by admissions tutors of the details of the qualification.

Perhaps inevitably, given the diffuse and decentralised nature of the university admissions process, there have been a few instances where admissions tutors have needed help to find out more. CIE anticipated this by making available a set of subject syllabus guides specially aimed at university admissions staff, describing course content, exam structure and grading system.

The guidance to universities stresses the way Cambridge Pre-U prepares students for successful university study – a linear structure that does not permit unit retakes; the

emphasis on independent study and research skills; stretch and challenge for all and not just the most able; and the opportunity to dig more deeply into chosen subjects.

School Higher Education advisors report that offers are coming in and that universities on the whole understand the qualification and appreciate the tariff awarded by UCAS. In rare cases of misunderstanding, CIE is working closely with schools

to ensure that universities make fair and appropriate offers to Cambridge Pre-U applicants. In all cases to date, university admissions officers have been anxious to act fairly and consistently.

It is clear that universities already appreciate the value that Cambridge Pre-U can add, and can see the quality of Cambridge Pre-U applicants; and the offers that applicants are receiving reflects this.



Viewpoint: impact on teaching and learning

It is important to us to talk to all schools that are offering, or interested in offering Cambridge Pre-U. We appreciate your feedback and suggestions, and do our best to answer your questions as fully as possible. Please don't hesitate to contact Peter Monteath, UK Schools Manager at international@cie.org.uk with your comments and queries.

During the summer holidays, a number of schools contacted us about extending their Cambridge Pre-U provision or introducing Cambridge Pre-U Principal Subjects for the first time.

Emma McKendrick, Headmistress of Downe House, sent a letter to parents in September outlining the benefits of moving to Cambridge Pre-U, having completed a full review of the options.

She wrote: 'Cambridge Pre-U does, in our view, have the potential to meet the needs of all our girls and prepare them well for both university and the world of work beyond... the courses are appropriately challenging with a grading structure which differentiates more keenly at the highest level; and it has a fascinating Global Perspectives and Independent Research element, which equips pupils for the needs of university...'

Downe House will offer almost all Cambridge Pre-U Principal Subjects and GPR by 2012. By then, all

members of the Sixth Form will follow the whole Cambridge Pre-U Diploma course. Mrs McKendrick commented: '... study for the Global Perspectives and Independent Research project will be wonderfully broadening and enriching activities.'

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Cambridge Pre-U in a mixed economy

Charterhouse has finished its first year of teaching 23 Cambridge Pre-U Principal Subjects. Many students are pursuing a mixed economy of Cambridge Pre-U and other qualifications, and all will study four or three and a half subjects.

Simon Allen, Master of Specialists at Charterhouse, outlined the benefits of teaching Cambridge Pre-U. He finds the syllabus content stimulating and interesting and appreciates the emphasis Cambridge Pre-U places on independent learning.

Simon picked out other benefits for students:

- Increased focus and motivation in year 12 pupils



- A much richer education experience
- Pupils can work at their own pace
- More time and support available for lower ability pupils, while there is greater scope for upper ability pupils to distinguish themselves
- Students also appreciate the opportunity to develop and pursue their own academic interests.

Simon saw compelling benefits for teachers too:

- Greater teaching time available
- Reinvigorating experience
- More autonomy to include one's own academic interests.



Feedback from students

So, what do students think?

Cambridge Pre-U student, Elizabeth Donaldson, compared Cambridge Pre-U with A Levels, which are also available at her school.

She says: 'Aptitude in essay writing is certainly put to the test with Cambridge Pre-U. In big essay subjects, students' writing abilities are constantly improving. The advantage of this, of course, is that by the end of the two years, pupils are very adept at writing high-quality and persuasively argued essays, which do not regurgitate facts. Whilst this type of exam structure is useful for university studies, it does mean that those who do not enjoy (or are not good at) writing long essays may struggle in this type of exam, where there are no source-based or 'describe' questions.'

Here is a summary of the rest of Elizabeth's findings:

'When I was choosing my options last year, I came across the 'unseen paper' component of the English Literature specification. The thought of going into the exam room completely unprepared made me very nervous, to the point where I wasn't sure if I even wanted to pursue the subject. Looking back, I am glad that I stuck with English. Now I don't rely on teachers as much to tell me what poems are about, or what novelists are trying to say because I can work it out for myself.'

Cambridge Pre-U English student

'Instead of learning about how to ask what time it is, we are now able to discuss current affairs, cinema, literature, art and culture, which are things I talk about with friends at school! We are also learning how to be able to read foreign media, and are picking up words used by native speakers. On the negative side though, there is a lot to cover over the two years, and the grammar can be very challenging at times.'

Cambridge Pre-U Languages student

'While the Pre-U syllabus is more demanding, the A Level in Biology is frustrating at times because of the specific words and phrases you need to include in answers in exams – so even if you know everything, if you don't mention one small word you can lose several points! However, at Pre-U it can also be annoying as you are not given as much help in terms of question structure in the papers, which means you really need to understand everything, and think for yourself more. This can be difficult when you are trying to make an 'educated guess.'

Cambridge Pre-U Chemistry and Physics student

'Cambridge Pre-U... is not as narrowly graded – for example, if you forget to mention the honours scandal in an essay about the failure of the Lloyd George coalition, you will not have marks taken off as long as your essay is well argued – it allows you to be more imaginative and put in your own opinion. In History especially, it is very necessary to read around the curriculum, as to get into the top D1 band, you need to be able to use historiography to back up your judgement of events. This means that I have had to become more reliant on books instead of the internet.'

Cambridge Pre-U History student

First examination results published

The first Cambridge Pre-U Short Course Certificate examination results were published in August. These are based on one-year courses in Modern Foreign Languages.

The results will be of interest to all schools offering or planning to offer Cambridge Pre-U Principal Subjects.

It is clear that candidates were well prepared, felt confident in their abilities, and displayed high levels of interest and engagement.

We were very encouraged to see the results of the first Short Courses and also the interim assessments, which have been useful for schools when predicting grades. The results of the Short Courses show that Cambridge Pre-U delivers. A high number of candidates achieved Distinctions, in line with teachers' predictions of A grades at A Level. This affirms the commitment to benchmark Pre-U performance at D3 with A grade; and at P3 with E grade at A Level.

The distribution between the Distinction grades has also been effective in identifying excellence. Based on the very positive results we are seeing, we look forward to the first award of full Cambridge Pre-U Principal Subject Certificates in 2010.

Full Examiner Reports are available by emailing us at international@cie.org.uk

Extracts from the Examiner Reports

'This was a new specification and a new examination, but it is much to the credit of all concerned that candidates appeared well prepared for the task and understood how to tackle the various exercises. There were no signs of candidates being faced with unexpected challenges either in terms of the level of the exercises themselves or in what was required in terms of the techniques involved in answering them.'

- [Cambridge Pre-U French Short Course Examiner Report](#).

'If the examiner can emerge from an oral surprised and pleased to have learned something new, and touched by the enthusiasm of his or her candidates – and this was often the case – then we are definitely on the right track!'

- [Report on June 2009 oral examination, Cambridge Pre-U French Short Course](#)

'The rubric states that candidates must research a topic related to the history, current affairs or culture (including art, cinema, literature and traditions) of the Hispanic world. Indeed all topics this summer were relevant and interesting, and candidates seized the opportunity to find out more about different aspects of several Spanish-speaking countries. Schools are reminded that candidates could be encouraged to

research topics which are related to their other Pre-U or A-level subjects, as this means ensuring that Spanish becomes more clearly relevant to students and possible future careers.'

- [Report on June 2009 oral examination, Cambridge Pre-U Spanish Short Course](#)

'The candidates chose their topics wisely, making sure that there was scope for analysis, evaluation and opinion and were able to demonstrate their full potential, relying on skills acquired through other parts of the curriculum. Most of them chose a literary text or a film, some went for a comparison between them. All candidates showed genuine interest in their topic and pleasure in discussing it... These candidates were well prepared for this unit and performed well. For the examiner this was a rewarding experience.'

- [Report on June 2009 oral examination, Cambridge Pre-U Italian Short Course](#)

In addition to Short Course feedback, many schools took advantage of the examination materials provided for interim assessment in the summer. Examiners moderated marked work sent in by schools and reported back, commenting on rank order and identifying examples of work that showed characteristics of particular grade bands.

Interim assessment – monitoring and reporting progress

The intention of Cambridge Pre-U is to provide appropriate stretch and challenge for all students. Those of moderate ability, who would pass with low grades at A Level, will not be disenfranchised and will achieve an appropriate pass grade with Cambridge Pre-U.

Following the first year of teaching, we can see that interim, formative assessments prove invaluable in identifying strengths and weaknesses and pointing to ways in which students can improve their performance. Learning is supported because feedback to students is both targeted and timely.

To help teachers become more

familiar with Cambridge Pre-U standards and enable them to make meaningful statements about likely performance in their students' UCAS references, CIE made a complete set of examination papers and mark schemes available and held subject-specific INSET, where teachers were able to meet examiners and discuss the mark schemes with them.

Responses from Cambridge Pre-U Teachers were enthusiastic: 'Thank you very much indeed. This report will prove very helpful indeed. A cursory read suggests we're on the right tracks,' commented one teacher. 'Thank you for your comments. I'm encouraged to see that they are in line with our own thoughts,' said another.



New developments

We are consulting with schools and universities on the development of a new Cambridge Pre-U Mathematics short course. We have received feedback from many schools that students need this kind of qualification to support applications to read subjects like Economics at university, and that it is desirable to offer students every opportunity to broaden their portfolios beyond their core subject specialisms.

If you would like more information about the consultation and development process, please email international@cie.org.uk



Compare and contrast: research into A Level and Cambridge Pre-U

Cambridge Assessment Group, the parent body of CIE and OCR will conduct research that compares Cambridge Pre-U and OCR A Level. Both awarding bodies' qualifications offer pathways into further education and employment for post-GCSE students. The aim of the research is to provide clear qualitative descriptions of the various demands each qualification makes on the students who enter for it, clarifying the differences and similarities in these demands.

A further aim of the project will be to compare the profiles of Cambridge Pre-U and A Level students, exploring their experiences of the courses and the impact on teaching and learning. The data will be provided through questionnaires and interviews with teachers. Findings should be useful in helping schools to make choices between different qualifications at 16 – 19.

New and updated materials now available

A number of new and updated Cambridge Pre-U publications and DVDs are now available from CIE. The *Schools' Guide* been revised and updated for 2009 – 2010, as has the *Guide for Higher Education*. Both documents can be downloaded from the CIE website on www.cie.org.uk/cambridgepreu or hard copies can be ordered by emailing Viv Thomas at thomas.v@cie.org.uk

We have also published the 2009 – 2010 Guide for Parents, new DVDs on Global Perspectives and Independent Research, and a new PowerPoint presentation for parents and year 11 students. These may also be ordered from CIE at the email address above, or downloaded from the CIE website.

