

# Benchmarking Cambridge International AS & A Level in the Context of the UK Education System

## Executive Summary

Submitted to Cambridge International Examinations by UK NARIC

The National Recognition Information Centre for the United Kingdom

The national agency responsible for providing information and expert opinion on  
qualifications and skills worldwide

March 2016

**Commercial in confidence**

## Scope and Methodology

UK NARIC was commissioned by Cambridge International Examinations to conduct a benchmarking study, examining the comparability between Cambridge International AS & A Level in the context of the UK education system. Consideration was also given to the structure and volume of the Cambridge Advanced International Certificate of Education (AICE) Diploma.

In terms of approach, UK NARIC applied its well-established benchmarking methodology, based upon the key principles of credential evaluation. The first stage involved a review of qualification aims, entry requirements, duration, structure and content, learning outcomes, modes of learning and assessment, and associated outcomes. Cambridge International AS & A Levels offered in six subjects were analysed within the scope of this study, these included mathematics, physics, history, English literature, business studies and Global Perspectives & Research. The process was supported by in-depth review of underpinning quality assurance processes used by Cambridge. This focussed on centre requirements and monitoring, qualification delivery, internal quality assurance, qualification development processes and practice, and assessment, grading and standard setting processes. Consideration was also given to any external recognition of Cambridge and its awards.

Comparative analysis of the Cambridge International AS & A Level programmes was conducted against the national GCE AS/A Level in the UK. Particular attention was given to learning outcomes, assessed skills and competencies in similarly focussed subjects. Moreover, the comparative analysis also considered the comparability of assessment methods with reference to question types and mark schemes. The combined findings informed the overall evaluation of comparability.

## Key Findings

In conclusion, the study found the Cambridge International AS & A Level to be globally relevant and robust, demonstrating overall comparability to the national AS/A Level, recognised senior secondary qualifications widely accepted for higher education admissions. Across all the six selected subjects, Cambridge International AS & A Levels provide a solid grounding in preparation for higher education, aiming to develop a combination of subject-specific and transferrable skills. The Cambridge International AS & A Level in Global Perspectives & Research in particular enables development and consolidation of higher order thinking skills and research skills valued by higher education institutions. Global Perspectives & Research also benefits from an interdisciplinary approach to study, which aims to connect subject-specific knowledge.

UK NARIC found Cambridge International AS & A Level specifications to provide a coherent and well-defined framework, while allowing centres the freedom to develop supporting curricula and implement their own methods of methods in their delivery. As such, Cambridge programmes can be easily tailored to be offered by centres based across a diverse range of international education systems. Flexible programmes of study in a number of subjects also offer candidates various options and pathways, allowing for depth and specialisation as well as breadth of subject coverage. The versatility and the global orientation of the Cambridge

International AS & A Level can be of particular value for schools intending to offer the awards alongside existing national provision.

Cambridge International AS & A Level assessment frameworks allow for broad yet thorough evaluation of skills and competencies acquired across the different subject areas. The principal assessment method is external examination, nevertheless a range of types of question and task appropriate to each subject are adopted to ensure holistic evaluation of candidate's abilities and reliable differentiation between higher and lower levels of performance.

Moreover, this study also found that Cambridge International AS & A Level qualification design and delivery are supported by robust and fit-for-purpose quality assurance procedures. Equally, the assessment development process, marking and grading are conducted in line with well-defined processes and procedures which correspond to UK standard practice.

### **Comparability in the UK Education System**

In summary, comparative analysis of the Cambridge International A Levels in the context of the UK education system demonstrated overall comparability to the national GCE A Level standard. Furthermore, the Cambridge International AS Levels can be considered comparable to the national GCE AS Level standard. Based on the subject requirements and current overall volume (6 credits), the Cambridge AICE Diploma can be considered comparable to achieving three GCE A Levels, with the forthcoming 7-credit Cambridge AICE Diploma comparable to three GCE A Levels and one GCE AS Level.

Review of associated outcomes considered UK university admissions policies and found that Cambridge International A Levels are typically accepted with the same grade requirements as those stipulated for national A Level holders. The Cambridge International and national A Levels across five subject areas are similar in terms of breadth and depth of content coverage despite observable differences in topic coverage, predominantly reflecting of the international focus of the Cambridge International A Level.

Learning outcomes demonstrated many areas of similarity between Cambridge International AS & A Level and the national AS/A Levels, with broadly comparable emphasis on developing knowledge and understanding, application, analysis and evaluation skills across the different subject areas. Assessment objectives encompass related skill areas and are weighted in a similar manner. Nonetheless, Cambridge International AS & A Level in Global Perspectives & Research demonstrate a stronger focus on skills acquisition in comparison with national AS/A Level subjects, and in particular, development of independent research skills in the Cambridge International A Level.

In terms of assessment, there are some differences relating to the linear assessment used by Cambridge International AS & A Level and the modular framework in place for the current (legacy) national A Level. The Cambridge International AS & A Level assessment is mainly based on external examination while the legacy national AS/A Level includes a higher proportion of internally assessed and externally moderated coursework components. Overall, the question types used in the written examinations, the assessed skills and rigour

observed across the papers and mark schemes were found to be comparable between the Cambridge International AS & A Level and the national AS/A Level. It is important to note that with the Cambridge International AS & A Level assessment methods demonstrate closer alignment to those for the reformed national awards, given the introduction of terminal, linear assessment.

A focus on synoptic assessment can be observed in the Cambridge International A Level across the different subject areas, evaluating different topic areas from across the respective syllabi, as is similarly the case in the national A Level. Essay writing is similarly a requirement in humanities subjects. Cambridge International AS & A Level questions provide scope to assess the full range of higher-order thinking skills such as evaluation and analysis which are also assessed in the national AS/A Level assessments. The mathematics and physics assessments in Cambridge International AS & A Level and the national AS/A Levels highlight a shared focus on technique and application in solving problems.

From September 2015, it is acknowledged that AS/A Levels are currently being redeveloped in line with UK government reforms. UK NARIC has considered the key changes proposed on a general level and on a subject level. In conclusion the changes are not felt to have an impact on the overall comparability of the Cambridge International AS & A Level.

<b>Qualification:</b>	Cambridge International AS Level
<b>Awarding Institution:</b>	Cambridge International Examinations
<b>Comparability:</b>	Is considered comparable to the GCE AS Level standard

<b>Qualification:</b>	Cambridge International A Level
<b>Awarding Institution:</b>	Cambridge International Examinations
<b>Comparability:</b>	Is considered comparable to the GCE A Level standard

Copyright © 2016 UK NARIC

All rights reserved. Short sections of text may be quoted without express permission provided that full credit and reference are given to the source. For any permissions enquiries, please contact UK NARIC using the address below.

Published by:  
UK NARIC  
Oriel House, Oriel Road  
Cheltenham, Gloucestershire  
United Kingdom  
GL50 1XP  
Email: [projects@naric.org.uk](mailto:projects@naric.org.uk)  
Telephone: +44 (0)1242 258609 Fax: +44(0)1242 258611