

Cambridge International A Level develops ‘college-ready’ students

The positive impact of Cambridge International A Levels on teaching and learning is backed up by a growing body of research.

Thousands of students get into university each year using Cambridge qualifications. The United States is a top study destination for Cambridge learners with more than 450 universities accepting Cambridge International AS and A Levels, including all Ivy League and Ivy Plus universities.

Our qualifications can help students get ahead in higher education, and this is backed up by a growing body of research on the Cambridge International AS and A Level programme (and its group award, the Cambridge AICE Diploma) in the US.

For our latest study, we explored the impact of Cambridge International AS and A Level on ‘college readiness’ – in other words, how the qualification helps

prepare students for university. Career and college readiness is receiving ever greater focus in US high schools, as aspirations rise and government legislation promotes college readiness for all.

Having reviewed the literature on this topic, we identified a number of high school to college transition criteria necessary to measure a student’s readiness for college (see below). We then mapped these criteria to the attributes of Cambridge International AS and A Level learners, drawing on the data from previous impact research studies¹, to measure the degree to which the Cambridge International AS and A Level (Cambridge AICE Diploma) programme promotes US college readiness.



What does it take to be college ready?

Our review of the literature on college readiness suggests a number of key factors that help learners make a successful transition to college. There is fairly broad professional agreement that learners need to:

- 1 be ready for an increase in the volume of content and pace of instruction
- 2 be prepared to move from memorisation and mechanical retrieval of factual information to thinking and responding more critically
- 3 have well-developed reading and writing skills
- 4 demonstrate a range of academic skills including research, critical thinking and numeracy skills
- 5 have a range of non-academic skills, including self-management behaviours
- 6 be able to study independently and in diverse groups
- 7 be able to interact successfully with a wide range of faculty, support staff and peers
- 8 be ‘college aware’ (understanding college values, norms and ways of thinking)
- 9 be able to present, participate in debate and positively engage with critical feedback

Research data

The data used in the study was collected from eight case study high schools in Florida and Virginia, and two universities in Florida and Minnesota.

Findings

The research shows that Cambridge International AS and A Level is distinct from other acceleration programmes (geared towards preparing US learners for college) because:

- it emphasises skills, especially critical thinking and advanced comprehension, more than content
- it develops knowledge of a narrow spread of material in greater depth
- it promotes advanced writing skills, particularly the ability to structure and defend an argument, rather than large amounts of detailed recall.

The research shows that Cambridge International AS and A Level is distinct from regular high school classes because:

- there is a higher reading load – students are expected to read more
- the academic expectations are closer to those experienced in college
- there is a greater degree of independent learning.

These characteristics of Cambridge International A Level have a positive impact on college readiness.

Our research² has also shown that Cambridge exams have a ‘washback effect’ on classroom practice – in other words, they impact on teaching and learning. Teachers emphasise argumentation skills, both written and verbal, and require their students to write more than in other classes. This helps learners get ready for the type of study required of them at university³.

Further reading

1 Shaw, S. D. & Bailey, C. (2011a). Success in the US: Are Cambridge International Assessments Good Preparation for University Study? *Journal of College Admission, No.213, pp.6–16*, Fall. Shaw, S. D. & Bailey, C. (2011b). An American university case study approach to predictive validity: Exploring the issues. *Research Matters, Issue 12, June 2011, pp. 18–26*.

2 Shaw, S. (2011). Investigating the Impact of Cambridge International Assessments on U.S. Stakeholders: Student and Teacher Perceptions. *College and University, Vol.87 No.2, pp. 12–23*, Fall.

3 Shaw, S. D. & Hudson, P. (in submission). The impact of the Cambridge International AS and A Level (AICE) Acceleration Program on US College Readiness.

“[The Cambridge programme] provides a rigorous lesson every time and moves through the curriculum at a **quick pace**.”

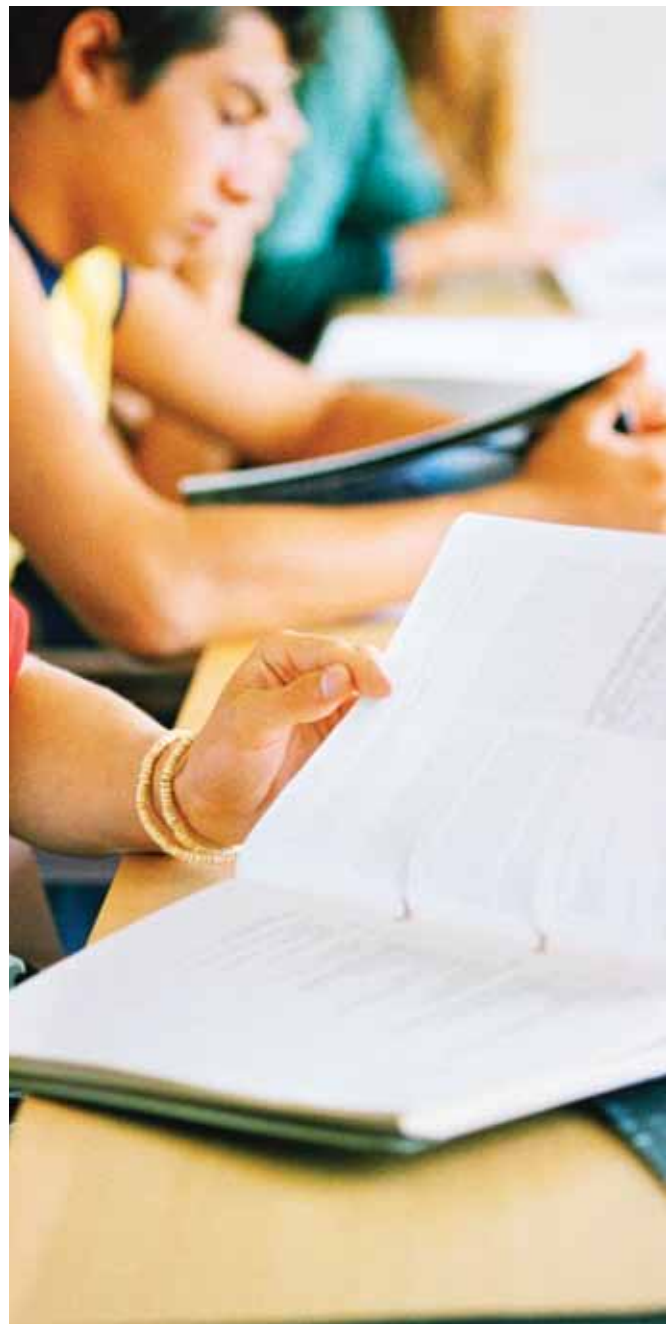
Cambridge teacher, US (impact study participant)

“The Cambridge AICE Diploma wants you to think. **Classes focus on your thinking**.”

Cambridge learner, US (impact study participant)

“Cambridge programmes allowed us **opportunities to communicate** and contribute.”

Cambridge learner, US (impact study participant)



Find out more about university recognition of Cambridge programmes and qualifications at www.cie.org.uk/recognition