IB or A level?

This is an adapted opinion piece written by the Bromsgrove Headmaster and added to by Mr Horan

Every year the question of IB or A level raises its head and whilst both have their advantages and disadvantages, the best decision needs to be made considering a wide range of factors.

I often hear students say the IB is “hard”. When I challenge that comment and ask what the benchmark is the response I normally get is: “this is what I have heard”. I have taught in an A level school, an IB school (Warwick Academy) and a school offering both programmes at the same time. The one thing in common that all the students, at all three schools, would say is that the work is “hard”. No matter if it was the A level or the IB. From my perspective having taught both, they are both “hard”. The IB has the edge in terms of the organisation but is that a bad thing? At the end of the day there are no “easy” options and students should not think that they can take an “easy” option.

Another factor to seriously consider is that WA students gain entry into the Universities that are appropriate for them, studying courses appropriate to them. This includes those doing Individual Subjects and those doing the Diploma. 100% of our 60 graduates last year achieved their first choice University. Our success in ensuring this accuracy should be a huge consideration for you. In addition the IB programme is seen internationally as the best preparation for University.

In a nutshell:
• The IB Diploma consists of 6 subjects with 3 studied at Higher Level and 3 at Standard Level. The A Level consists of 4 AS courses in the first year and then 3 A2 courses in the second making 3 A levels. The IB also includes a compulsory core programme comprising of Theory of Knowledge, an Extended Essay and an evaluation of a student’s CAS (Creativity, Action and Service). You have to “pass” this core as well as secure good scores in your six subjects to get a Diploma.
• The IB is holistic while the A level courses are discrete
• The IB is unashamedly idealistic in its philosophy while the A level is a pragmatic test of academic ability.
• The IB uses a points system (the perfect score is 45 points), where 24 points and above secures an IB Diploma. The A level is graded by letters, with A* being the top grade. The Diploma is, effectively, a worldwide qualification.

Questions and considerations with regards the A levels
• They are UK centric and are designed to service a UK market.
• The government’s Education White Paper (November 2010) acknowledges A levels to be “educationally inappropriate” in part because of the modules and re-sits. So the government is abolishing (to a very great extent, and maybe entirely) the offending modules and re-sits. This has been big news. However, the White Paper says that even after these dramatic changes to A level, the government will decide “whether these and other recent changes are sufficient to address the concerns with A levels.” At GCSE, for example, the government is introducing the English Baccalaureate made up of a specified number of core GCSEs at high grades (the soft options won’t count). Don’t be surprised if something similar happens at A level...in fact the talk at the moment is that some of these changes could be on the way (or it could be all talk).
• Grade inflation has been rampant. Top universities look back at AS module and GCSE results to distinguish between the masses of straight A candidates from the A level. Originally, many universities said they would not countenance the new A* grades, but some changed their tune very quickly when confronted by a sea of straight A grades. A*s, however, are very difficult to achieve if you are bright but not necessarily exceptional in a particular subject. A*s demand still more specialisation at 16+. In September 2013 Universities announced they are considering more specialised entrance examinations (like the UKCAT, BMAT etc.) because they are unsure where the A level changes will end up.
• Are three traditional, discrete old school subjects really appropriate for our children’s future? Our children’s world will be a world in which a President of the USA will probably have Spanish as a first language, where Brazil, India and Russia will be challenging China for economic supremacy and where empathetic, global cooperation will be prerequisites for any nation’s success. It’s not the jetpacks and Bacofoil space suits we were promised.

How come every school isn’t doing IB if it’s so good?
• You can’t just start teaching IB: the IB organisation will only make you an IB World School if they think you are up to it. You have to become accredited and that means passing what is effectively an inspection. So, some schools have tried to introduce IB and failed at the first hurdle.
• It can be expensive to introduce. Many schools simply cannot afford to do this.
• It’s challenging and schools don’t want to be seen to fail. Unlike A level, there is no grade inflation so you can’t hide behind a wave of rising scores year on year. 40 points was a great IB score in 1970, and it’s a great IB score now.
• It’s got the word “International” in it and that scares off many schools.

Isn’t IB some new-fangled craze?
It’s over forty years old. Close to one million students are studying on the programme in one hundred and thirty nine countries. Some of the UK’s leading independent schools are now wholly IB Schools.

But in IB you have to do Maths and a Language. That’s a huge turn off for many teenagers.
Indeed so. And that’s one of the reasons why the UK is in free fall in the world education tables. The point is: you don’t have to opt for an especially difficult Maths or language course. Weaker GCSE mathematicians can and should choose Maths Studies which is the easiest of the three IB Maths options. It is designed to keep your long division ticking along while you are trying to get into a top university to read History or whatever. Students who struggled with a language at GCSE or before can actually start a new one at IB from scratch (ab initio Spanish, for example, is a beginners course and assumes you have never done the language). Obviously, students wishing to study a language at university will select a more challenging option in this area. Pick your level, says the IB, but don’t give up on these crucial skills when you are only 16 years old. An international future beckons and you need to be ready for a different world.

I’ve heard IB is for super intelligent pupils, while A level is for the rest.
Not true. This kind of comment is a huge insult to top A level pupils chasing the highest grades. And it’s a snobbishly demeaning slight to academically average, hardworking pupils who will do well at IB if they apply themselves – we have many at WA. This kind of comment is often used to defend an A level choice as the informed option for those not blinded by IB propaganda.
IB is more work. Everybody knows that.
An A level candidate aiming for three A*s will work every bit as hard as a similar IB candidate looking to achieve over 40 points. But an A level candidate looking for an easy three Cs in soft subjects could work less hard than a similar candidate trying to get the minimum IB Diploma score (24 points). The reality is that three Cs are less likely than 24 points to get you to the University of your choice - many thousands end up with the same three Cs whereas far fewer compete on 24 points (differentiation).

Isn't A level about depth while IB is concerned with breadth?
You'd think three subjects versus six subjects (plus the core) make this an easy one to answer. But such comparisons are simplistic, even, in some subjects, fatuous.

Do UK Universities favour the A level over the IB, or is it harder to get into a University with the IB?
The experience at WA is that they do not. What has been noticed is that offers made above the 40 point mark are, on occasion, harder than the A level offers for the same course. Offers in the 24 to 39 points are comparable to the A level. However at 24 points the likelihood of getting the offer for the course and the University that the student desires is easier - as explained above. What is very evident is that having Bermuda and the breadth of extra-curricular activities on offer at WA (and on island) on a reference does create a certain uniqueness that catches the eye of the admissions tutors at the Universities. The power of the reference and being able to differentiate yourself from the “pack” is key to a successful University application. The “pack” in the UK are those studying the A level.

Why does WA not offer A levels and the IB?
• In Bermuda we service 3 main jurisdictions (the UK, Canada and the USA) and a growing number of others (Australia, Finland, South Korea) and thus need an internationally recognised programme, not a UK centric one.
• The cost of running both the A level and IB makes it out of reach.
• We believe that the global market has changed and is changing and demands students to have a broader subject understanding (Math, English and an additional language) and a wider set of skills that come packaged with the IB.
• Our success at the IB.
• Our success at University entry around the world.

Conclusion – A personal view
The UK government knows A levels are an anachronism and is quite rightly changing what they are, so keep a very wary eye on what happens if you are considering them. The position of a typical WA pupil should be the IB. The world has changed.

Other useful links:
http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6347176
http://www.sciencecouncil.org/content/shameful-lost-opportunity-get-levels-fit-21st-century-0
http://www.independent.co.uk/student/news/more-university-admissions-tests-on-the-way-8851712.html
http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/schools/the-ib-develops-the-students-top-universities-want-8503818.html