

# Benchmarking the Oxford International AQA Examinations' International GCSEs: Executive Summary

Submitted to the Oxford International AQA 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

June 2017

*Version 3*

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This study aims to benchmark Oxford International AQA Examinations' international self-regulated GCSE qualifications against national GCSE standards. The study has been commissioned by Oxford International AQA Examinations<sup>1</sup>, who have launched a new suite of international GCSEs and GCE AS/A-level qualifications with first teaching in September 2016.

To support the preparation of the international qualifications, this study examines the specifications and specimen assessment materials for each Oxford International AQA Examinations' GCSE<sup>2</sup>, followed by a comparative analysis against those for national AQA GCSEs in corresponding subjects, used as a reference point for national GCSE standards in practice<sup>3</sup>. In accordance with UK NARIC's established methodology for benchmarking qualifications, the core programme and subject-specific GCSE qualification components evaluated in this study are:

- Entry requirements
- Duration
- Structure and content
- Learning outcomes
- Methods of learning and assessment
- Associated outcomes
- Quality assurance and control mechanisms.

The comparative analysis of the core design has placed particular emphasis on the intended learning outcomes (the expected knowledge, skills and competencies students' should have on completion of the programme) of the Oxford International AQA Examinations' international GCSEs. The study also focussed on each programme's assessment objectives and methods, including the type and level at which examination questions have been set. Consideration has also been given to Oxford International AQA Examinations' proposed quality assurance and control processes intended to support the development, delivery and assessment of the international GCSEs analysed in this study, finding these to be consistent to that employed for AQA's current GCSEs.

The study has found that Oxford International AQA Examinations' GCSEs compare well to AQA national GCSEs. Like national AQA GCSEs, Oxford International AQA Examinations' GCSEs are secondary-level linear qualifications completed over the course of two years, with no formal entry requirements. The single subject international awards also have the same number of guided learning hours (120 hours) as AQA single GCSE awards, with

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<sup>1</sup> A joint venture formed in May 2015 between Oxford University Press, a department of the University of Oxford, and AQA, an independent education charity based in the UK and provider of academic qualifications to around 30 countries worldwide (AQA, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> At the time of the first review in 2015, international GCSEs had been developed in eight subjects: biology, chemistry, combined double award in science, English language, English as a second language, English literature, mathematics, and physics. A new revised specification and assessment materials were reviewed for English as a second language in August 2016 and included in an updated report (Version 2). Three new subjects were developed and reviewed in June 2017 and included in Version 3 of this report: business, computer science, and geography.

<sup>3</sup> From the outset of the study it was acknowledged that national GCSEs were undergoing reform in the UK and that, for some subjects, AQA specifications would reflect new standards. The reformed specifications were used wherever possible whilst acknowledging that legacy award specifications would be the most appropriate reference where specifications for the reformed subjects were still in draft format.

double awards (currently only available for combined science) similarly having double the number of guided learning hours (240 hours) as a single-subject.

Differences, where observed, were typically of a structural nature or reflected one of the overall aims of the international awards: to offer international centres a de-anglicised alternative to the AQA GCSEs. Between certain Oxford International AQA Examinations' GCSE subjects and AQA GCSE subjects, there were different assessment routes, with some subjects assessed wholly through external assessment, typically through written examination; or through a combination of external and internal assessments, such as controlled assessment or coursework. Tiered examinations, widely used in legacy national GCSEs, are not widely used in the international awards; currently planned for Mathematics and the double award Combined Science only.

The intended aims, learning outcomes and assessment objectives and weighting of each Oxford International AQA Examinations' GCSE subject are broadly comparable with the knowledge, understanding, skills and competencies expected in the national AQA GCSEs. An evaluation of the examination papers has confirmed that Oxford International AQA Examinations' GCSEs assess a comparable level and range of knowledge, skills and competencies as AQA GCSEs.

Therefore, with consideration to the key findings from the in-depth evaluation and comparison of each of the eleven international GCSE subject specifications with national GCSE standards, UK NARIC finds the overall comparability of Oxford International AQA Examinations' international GCSE to be as follows:

Oxford International AQA Examinations award	Comparability in the context of the UK
International GCSE	Is considered comparable to the GCSE standard

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# Benchmarking the Oxford International AQA Examinations' International AS/A-levels: Executive Summary

Submitted to the Oxford International AQA Examinations by UK NARIC

The National Recognition Information Centre for the United Kingdom

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recognising international expertise

UK NARIC has been commissioned by Oxford International AQA Examinations, a joint venture formed between Oxford University Press, a department of the University of Oxford; and AQA, to undertake an independent benchmarking study of their international self-regulated AS/A-levels, (first taught in September 2016) to determine whether these can be considered to be of a comparable level to the UK national GCE AS/A-level standard.

This study has involved a desk-based review and analysis of the Oxford International AQA Examinations AS/A-level specifications, sample exam papers, marking guidelines and other assessment documentation. As the AS/A-levels are single-subject qualifications, UK NARIC reviewed each international subject<sup>1</sup> against national GCE AS/A-level specifications and assessment materials for corresponding subjects. Since AQA AS and A-levels must reflect national standards and criteria at AS/A-level, the study used AQA materials as a reference point for national standards<sup>2</sup>.

As part of an update to the report in August 2017, Oxford International AQA Examinations has requested a comparison of its International Project Qualification (IPQ) to the UK Level 3 Extended Project Qualification (EPQ), a standalone qualification accredited at Level 3 on the National Qualification Framework (NQF) and an alternative qualification to study alongside the AS/A-level qualifications. As with the AS/A-levels, AQA materials have been used as a reference point for national standards.

Employing the principles of UK NARIC's established benchmarking methodology, the study has sought to compare the core design components of the international and national programmes, with reference to UK NARIC's standard evaluation criteria in terms of:

- Entry requirements
- Duration
- Structure and content
- Learning outcomes<sup>3</sup>
- Methods of learning and assessment
- Associated outcomes.

Particular focus has been placed on assessment objectives – the knowledge, skills and competencies that should be assessed of students – and on the assessment methods, including the types of assessment used as well as the type and level at which examination questions have been set for each qualification.

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of the first review in 2015, the international AS/A-levels had been developed in seven subjects: biology, chemistry, English language, English literature, further mathematics, mathematics, and physics. An International Project Qualification and three new AS/A-level subjects were developed and reviewed in 2017 and included in this second updated report: business, geography and psychology.

<sup>2</sup> From the outset of the study it was acknowledged that the national GCE AS and A-levels are currently undergoing reform in the UK and that, for some subjects, AQA specifications would reflect new standards. These were used wherever possible whilst acknowledging that legacy award specifications would be the most appropriate reference where specifications for the reformed subjects were still in draft format.

<sup>3</sup> In both the national and international AS/A-level specifications, learning outcomes (referencing the expected knowledge, skills and competencies that students should have on completion of a programme of study) are not explicitly outlined; to understand the knowledge and skills to be tested, reference was instead made to the identified assessment objectives set for each qualification.

The study found clear similarities, alongside some minor differences, in terms of the overall aims and the content breadth and depth, with all programmes designed to provide a comparable level of preparation for the purposes of further study. As with UK AS/A-levels and EPQ, there are no formal entry requirements but guidance is given to schools for entry to the international programmes, with students expected to have completed a level of education broadly comparable to that at GCSE level. Furthermore each qualification has the same number of recommended guided learning hours: 360 guided learning hours for the full A-level qualification, typically taken over two years.

It is important to note that the newly reformed national awards (first A-level examination in May/June 2017) follow a linear structure where the AS is de-coupled from the A-level. By contrast, the Oxford International AQA Examinations international AS/A-levels are modular in structure and the AS results contribute to the overall A-level, thereby more closely reflecting the structure of the legacy national GCE AS/A-levels (for examinations from 2014). The format of the Oxford International AQA Examinations IPQ is also similar to the AQA EPQ with both including a set of skills taught over 30 guided learning hours, and an additional 90 hours of independent study.

When comparing the assessment objectives, differences were found between many of the national and international specifications in terms of the number and weighting of individual assessment objectives; however the majority of the Oxford International AQA Examinations assessment objectives reflected a comparable level of knowledge and skills to those prescribed within the AQA specifications, especially those assessment objectives relating to knowledge and understanding. Three of the subjects (business, geography, and psychology) include the same assessment objectives, and only minor differences in weighting.

Similarities were also evident in the assessment of the qualifications: both the Oxford International AQA Examinations and AQA AS/A-level specifications include externally assessed written exams, with some subjects also including elements of internal assessment. Analysis of examination questions from both qualifications revealed that questions were of comparable demand, with similar types of questions posed; requiring similar knowledge, skills and strategy of the student; involving the use of familiar and unfamiliar contexts, and with a similar mark allocation. The Oxford International AQA Examinations IPQ and AQA EPQ also include the same assessment format with the sole focus on an independent project with comparable expectations for student submissions.

Consideration has also been given to the quality assurance and control processes proposed to underpin the design, delivery and assessment of the international awards: review of Oxford International AQA Examinations proposed policies and processes found these to be consistent with those in place for AQA's existing national and international provision.

In light of the findings from the review of the international and national qualifications, encompassing an in-depth review and comparison of specifications and assessment materials for ten AS/A-levels subjects and the Level 3 EPQ/IPQ, and the key overall findings to emerge from this, UK NARIC finds the overall comparability of Oxford International AQA Examinations international awards to be as follows:

Oxford International AQA Examinations award	Comparability in the context of the UK
International AS level	Is considered comparable to the GCE AS standard
International A-Level	Is considered comparable to the GCE A-level standard
International Project Qualification	Is considered comparable to the Level 3 Extended Project Qualification

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