

Benchmarking Cambridge International AS & A Level: Summary of Findings on Global Perspectives & Research

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

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Scope and Methodology

UK NARIC was commissioned by Cambridge International Examinations to conduct a benchmarking study of Cambridge International AS & A Level. As part of this study, Cambridge International AS & A Level Global Perspectives & Research was reviewed and this summary details the key findings of UK NARIC's study in relation to the programme and its comparability across three international education systems: the UK, the USA and Australia.

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, mode of learning and assessment and associated outcomes. Consideration was also given to the quality assurance mechanisms and processes that underpin Cambridge International awards.

Comparative analysis of the Cambridge International AS & A Level was conducted against well-recognised upper secondary school qualifications, including national GCE AS/A Level in the UK, the Advanced Placement (AP) Tests in the US and the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) in New South Wales, Australia. Particular attention was given to learning outcomes, assessment methods, and assessed skills and competencies.

Review and International Comparisons

In addition to developing subject-specific skills and knowledge, Cambridge also acknowledges the importance of cross-curricula learning and academic skills. Cambridge International AS & A Level Global Perspectives & Research has been designed as a cross-curricular, skills-based course which aims to connect subject-specific knowledge and to develop students' self-reflection, independent research skills and the ability to think critically about a range of global issues.

Subject content for the Cambridge International AS & A Level in Global Perspectives & Research is presented as series of global topics, from which candidates study at least three. The programme is flexible and teachers are free to choose the material and specific subject matter they teach, although the themes should be studied from a global outlook with coverage of varying perspectives. The breadth of the suggested global topic areas is beneficial as it allows the programme to be tailored to the candidate's interests and also enables a range of different topics to be covered. This provides scope for encouraging the interdisciplinary approach proposed in the qualification aims.

The Cambridge International AS Level Global Perspectives & Research is assessed through a combination of written examination, essay and a team project and reflective paper. The written examination involves identification of key arguments presented on unprepared source material, evaluating the arguments in terms of their validity and reliability and comparing and contrasting alternative arguments from different sources, assessing students' ability to analyse, integrate and think independently.

The essay component provides an opportunity for assessing independent research and essay writing skills. The essay enables candidates to demonstrate wider reading around the selected topic in addition to their critical analysis skills and selective and concise use of supporting evidence within a 2000 word limit.

The team project provides an assessment of oral communication skills, in particular the ability of the candidate to produce a reasoned argument. Assessment criteria place emphasis on the clarity of spoken communication and ability to present persuasive arguments concisely within the given timeframe. The ability to reflect and produce a personal evaluation of the team project is assessed in the reflective report component.

To achieve the full Cambridge International A Level, students would also need to write an extended research report on a topic of their choosing. This provides a further in-depth assessment of academic skills in formulating a research question, planning and devising a suitable methodological approach, data collation, analysis and evaluation of findings, limitations and identifying areas for further research. Independence of thought and originality also form part of the assessment criteria.

In terms of international comparisons, Cambridge International A Level Global Perspectives & Research is considered to be:

- Of a comparable level to study at GCE A Level standard in the UK, with the Cambridge International AS Level comparable to the GCE AS Level standard.

There is no similarly-focussed subject in the UK. In contrast to subject-specific national A Level examinations which balance skills and knowledge, the Global Perspectives & Research assessment criteria is interdisciplinary and has a stronger focus on evaluating academic skills. The skills the Global Perspectives & Research seeks to develop may also be found in some of the humanities subjects in the UK such as national A Levels in history and English literature, but Global Perspectives & Research has a comparably stronger focus on applying these to analyse topics of contemporary and international relevance. Overall 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.

- Of a comparable level to study at Senior Secondary Certificate of Education standard in Australia

There is no similarly-focussed subject in the HSC. Some of the general academic skills developed in the programme are covered to some extent in the humanities HSC subjects and the social sciences, such as analysis and evaluation of documents, producing a personal response to a topic or question and general inquiry skills but there is no standalone course focussed on global perspectives or specifically on research-oriented skills. However, the Cambridge International A Level in particular places more emphasis on independent research than single subjects offered as part of the HSC. In addition there is more emphasis on collaboration and team working in the Cambridge International AS & A Level than that observed in the HSC outcomes and skill components.

- Of a comparable level to the AP standard in the US.

When considered in the context of the US education system, the study found that both the Cambridge International AS & A Level in Global Perspectives & Research and the AP Capstone courses (AP Seminar and AP Research) similarly focus on skills whilst the context and content may differ. In particular Cambridge International AS & A Level in Global Perspectives & Research students focus on topics of contemporary global relevance, while for the AP Seminar and Research, the topics can vary – whether those of national relevance which relate to US citizenship and/or global topics such as those suggested in the Cambridge specification.

Differences are apparent in the assessment frameworks used in the AP and Cambridge International A Level, specifically in terms of question type and scope of assessment. Overall comparability is evident in the level and range of cognitive skills assessed and the depth of knowledge and understanding expected from AP and Cambridge International A Level candidates across the different subject areas. The Cambridge International AS & A Level Global Perspectives & Research were found to be broadly comparable to AP Seminar and AP Research programmes which are delivered as part of the AP Capstone Diploma. The Cambridge International AS Level Global Perspectives & Research assessment demonstrated comparability with the AP Seminar while the Cambridge International A Level related more closely to the AP Research, which also requires independent research study and presentation.

In conclusion, the study found that the Cambridge International AS & A Level Global Perspectives & Research, through an interdisciplinary approach, develop and assess softer transferrable skills (including oral presentation and communication skills, collaboration and team working) as well as higher order thinking skills. These include identifying and analysing different arguments and perspectives, synthesising new arguments based on personal reflection, and particularly in the case of the Cambridge International A Level, independent research skills. The Cambridge International A Level is considered of a comparable level to senior secondary qualifications widely accepted for higher education admission, whilst the skills the programme are particularly relevant in preparing students for higher education study internationally.

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