

The Cambridge International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE)



The Cambridge IGCSE can be considered of a comparable level to the GCSE.

CONTEXT AND SCOPE

The Cambridge IGCSE is a two-year secondary qualification targeting learners aged 14-16, awarded by Cambridge Assessment International Education. First examined in 1988, the Cambridge IGCSE is now offered across 5,000 schools in 145 countries and counted 750,000 examination entries in 2017/2018¹. The Cambridge IGCSE is available in over 70 subjects, 30 of which are languages². Students are typically graded on an A*-G basis though schools in selected countries may alternatively choose to follow a 9-1 grading system.

In 2019, Cambridge Assessment International Education commissioned UK NARIC to undertake an independent evaluation and benchmarking of their trademarked Cambridge IGCSE qualifications in the context of the UK education system³. In undertaking this study, it

¹ Cambridge Assessment International Education (2018), *Cambridge IGCSE Standards and GCSE*. Available at: <https://www.cambridgeinternational.org/Images/476025-cambridge-igcse-standards-and-gcse.pdf>.

² Cambridge Assessment International Education (n.d.), *Cambridge IGCSE Curriculum*. Available at: <https://www.cambridgeinternational.org/programmes-and-qualifications/cambridge-upper-secondary/cambridge-igcse/curriculum/>.

³ The study follows a previous UK NARIC study of the Cambridge IGCSEs in the context of the UK and Australian education systems. Having reviewed a selection of the Cambridge IGCSEs to the now legacy GCSE

is important to bear in mind that GCSEs are awarded by five different awarding organisations in the UK. Each awarding organisation must demonstrate that its GCSE specifications align with qualification and subject conditions, which are set by one of three regulatory bodies⁴. Legislation requires GCSEs offered in England, Wales and Northern Ireland to be comparable and there are a number of common features across all organisations. Nonetheless, there are differences in terms of, for example, grading, subject content, assessment methods, and qualification structure. The study has sought to identify these variations where relevant in order to determine how the Cambridge IGCSEs compare in the context of the UK system as a whole.

KEY FINDINGS

Both the Cambridge IGCSE and GCSE are two-year, single-subject qualifications targeting students aged 14-16, with the aim of preparing them for further study or employment. There is no upper limit to the number of subjects that can be taken by students. Many full-time school students would take 8-10 subjects.

Content differences are inevitable noting that the Cambridge IGCSE is designed to meet the diverse needs of an international audience, whilst the GCSE focusses on content relevant to the national priorities. For example, in History, GCSE specifications must ensure that 40% of assessed content focusses on British History, as might be expected for a national qualification. By contrast, the Cambridge IGCSE content on British History is optional and there are a number of other country options that schools may study. Overall, both qualifications provide a similar breadth and depth of study. The Cambridge IGCSE curriculum has been designed around students receiving around 130 guided learning hours for each subject, with the GCSE listing 120 guided learning hours for single awards, 60 for short courses and 240 for double awards.

Differences in the construct of the Cambridge IGCSE and GCSE assessment objectives makes it difficult to compare them in terms of weighting; however the study identified considerable similarities in the knowledge and skills that the Cambridge IGCSE and GCSE seek to assess. For example, in the case of Chemistry, both qualifications seek to assess students':

- Knowledge and understanding of scientific ideas or concepts, terminology, techniques and procedures
- Ability to apply that knowledge, for example, to select and use information / data to identify patterns or connections, to make judgements and draw conclusions, and to solve problems
- Experimental skills.

As a further example, the study found that both the Cambridge IGCSE and GCSE English programmes seek to assess students' ability to:

specifications in England, the 2016 study found the Cambridge IGCSEs to be of a comparable level to the national GCSE.

⁴ Ofqual regulates Edexcel, AQA, OCR and Eduqas for GCSEs in England. Qualifications Wales regulates WJEC for qualifications in Wales, and CCEA regulates GCSEs in Northern Ireland.

- Discern both explicit and implicit information, demonstrating understanding of author effect
- Evaluate texts, using examples from the text to support their arguments
- Write accurately and effectively, using a range of appropriate vocabulary and grammar, relevant to context
- Structure arguments logically.

In terms of the assessment framework, both qualifications employ external assessment in the form of timed, written, externally set examinations. GCSEs regulated by Ofqual are linear in nature, meaning that all assessment comes at the end of the two-year programme of study – this is similarly true for the Cambridge IGCSE. For those regulated by Qualifications Wales and CCEA, some subjects are linear, whilst others remain modular. For the Cambridge IGCSE there is, for some subjects, the choice between a fully exam-based route and a route which replaces one paper with an internally assessed, externally moderated coursework component. The Cambridge [Code of Practice](#) sets out the requirements for schemes of assessment to ensure the reliability and validity of all forms of assessment.

Of the five subjects reviewed in this study, four of those in the GCSE (Ofqual-regulated specifications) are assessed wholly by external examination. The exception is French, noting that the oral exam will be internally assessed by the school, and externally moderated by the awarding organisation. For GCSEs regulated by the other two regulators, non-exam assessment remains in three to four of the five subjects reviewed. For the Cambridge IGCSEs, English, French and History all have routes where non-exam assessment can be included.

Review of specimen and past papers found that both the Cambridge IGCSE and GCSEs employ similar question types and assess a comparable range of skills overall. The Cambridge IGCSE in some subjects places greater weighting on multiple-choice, assessing knowledge, understanding data handling and problem solving (application). The GCSE uses matching and short-answer questions to similarly assess students' knowledge, understanding and application of knowledge. The GCSE and Cambridge IGCSE both include longer answer questions, which aim to assess depth of knowledge and understanding as well as higher order skills of analysis and evaluation.

Holders of the GCSE and Cambridge IGCSE can progress to upper secondary studies, whether through the national or Cambridge International AS & A Levels or other national/international secondary qualifications. Grades may be considered as part of undergraduate admissions decisions but it is the A Levels (or comparable Level 3 qualifications) that form the basis for entry to degree programmes.

Having reviewed Cambridge IGCSE syllabi, assessment materials and the underpinning Code of Practice, UK NARIC has found the Cambridge IGCSE to be of a comparable level to the GCSE, with clear similarities in terms of the entry, structure, and the skills targeted for assessment. Differences in content and assessment options, where noted, largely reflect the international nature of the Cambridge IGCSE and do not impact the overall comparability in terms of level:

Qualification:	Cambridge IGCSE
Awarding Institution:	Cambridge Assessment International Education
Comparability:	Is considered comparable to GCSE.

Methodology

Based on UK NARIC's well-established methodology for credential evaluation, this independent evaluation and benchmarking study comprised a detailed review of the Cambridge IGCSEs in terms of:

- Entry requirements
- Duration, including recommended guided learning hours
- Content and structure
- Modes of learning and assessment
- Learning outcomes and assessment objectives
- Associated outcomes.

As part of this, particular focus has been placed on a sample of Cambridge IGCSE and GCSE subjects: chemistry, English language, history, mathematics and French. This considered the syllabi for examination in 2020 and 2021 along with the specimen assessment materials and mark schemes in relation to specifications and past or sample assessment materials in the same subjects from a range of GCSE examination boards⁵ in the UK.

⁵ The following specifications were used as a reference point for GCSE standards, although it should be noted that the purpose of this approach was to inform an overarching evaluation of the Cambridge IGCSE and GCSE comparability as qualifications, not to establish subject-for-subject equivalency: AQA (9-1) GCSE Chemistry (8462), AQA (9-1) GCSE English Language (8700), AQA (9-1) GCSE French (8658), Pearson Edexcel (9-1) History (1HI0), Pearson Edexcel (9-1) Mathematics (1MA1).