

The ins and outs of the Cambridge curriculum

The Cambridge education system is often mentioned as an alternative option to South Africa's NSC examinations (DBE and IEB), but what is it exactly?



Formed by the UK's University of Cambridge more than 150 years ago, Cambridge Assessment International Education (CAIE) is the world's largest provider of international education programmes to over 8 million candidates in 160 countries. Its A Level qualifications are recognised and valued by all Ivy League and Ivy Plus universities in the US, all UK universities, as well as those in Australia, Canada, Germany and beyond. The Cambridge AS and A Levels are also accepted at South African universities.

The merits

"The Cambridge International curriculum is flexible, challenging and inspiring, plus all final examinations are externally set and marked by Cambridge International," says Gareth Tucker, director of Cambridge at Somerset College, an independent school in Somerset West that is fully accredited with the Cambridge International Programme.

"In a nutshell," Tucker explains, "the ideals espoused by the Cambridge curriculum are very similar to those of the IEB but the former is more flexible in terms of routes to follow to a final qualification, covers the subject matter in more depth and gives a deeper understanding of the topics covered."

“Fewer subjects are studied at A-Level, which means a more concentrated approach. Deep knowledge of focused subjects as well as conceptual understanding is fostered, encouraging students to develop higher-order problem solving and thinking skills.”

He adds that students are encouraged to both do independent research as well as collaborate with their peers; regular practicals in the science subjects are emphasised and students learn to present their arguments openly.

He explains the two-year, staged Cambridge International A Level programme run by Somerset College: “Successful students achieve the Advanced Subsidiary (AS) qualification at the end of the first year and full Advanced Level (A Level) qualifications after the second year. The AS qualification is seen as equivalent to the Grade 12 National Senior Certificate (NSC) achieved via the DBE or IEB route.”

Who will it suit

Students who are able to work independently and take responsibility for their own studies will thrive in the Cambridge Programme, says Tucker. “The programme is good for those who relish a challenge and want to be stretched academically and emotionally. They must be prepared to work hard outside of the classroom and to be engaged at all times in the classroom.”

Remember, the UK’s IGCSE, usually written by 16-year-olds, is their school leaving certificate. AS and A Levels are a step up and some students will find them challenging.

Tucker agrees: “The Somerset College Cambridge Programme is an accelerated programme. Students will complete a Grade 12 equivalent in one year, and it does take some time to get used to the teaching and questioning style.”

He explains that final results are based on the final external examinations: “There is no continuous assessment mark, so students who suffer from examination anxiety should think carefully about entering the programme.” Tucker adds that the Cambridge Curriculum may not be ideal for those intending to study in South Africa.

“That said, if there’s a possibility that your child will choose to study abroad or your family is considering emigration, this is an important option to consider. While the DBE and IEB matrices are accepted by many international universities, Cambridge A Levels are accepted far more widely. And they put a student on the same academic level as other international students applying to those universities.”

Tucker also emphasises the importance of ensuring the subjects a student takes will give them access to the universities of their choice, whichever examinations they will be writing. “We offer subjects that are accepted by universities around the world in the fields of Science, Finance and Commerce, Engineering and Computer Science. But, just as they’d do when choosing subjects that will gain them admission to a South African university, a student looking to study abroad should contact the universities they are interested in and find out the actual requirements before making a final decision.

Questions to ask when evaluating Cambridge schools

Proper accreditation of the institution is the most important question, says Tucker. “This will largely determine quality but past results indicate how students of that institution are comparing with others across the world, so ask for those too. As an example, evidence of the strong programme offered at Somerset College is found in past students who have earned the top marks in the world for Maths, IT, physics and English.”

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