

Dispelling Myths About CIE

An information sheet for schools

September 2007

“The students get marked for what they get right, not penalised for what they get wrong.” *Dan Franicevic, Mathematics Teacher, Hillcrest High School*

“The professional development is outstanding. It is provided for most subject areas by CIE by trained staff from the UK. We always send all our teachers and they come back buzzing.” *Sherida Penman Walters, Executive Principal, Pinehurst School*

“Students are challenged by the courses. They see them as being difficult and thus know hard work is required for success. Classroom attitude has been great. Staff really enjoy teaching the Maths papers. There are some interesting questions with nice twists.” *Barry Thomas, CIE Co-Ordinator, Christchurch Boys High School*

“It was envisaged that staffing may be an extra cost running smaller classes in the senior school to cater for CIE; Westlake Boys’ High School decided to have a cohort of 140 students per year group to reduce any issues of too small classes. CIE has been hugely successful for Westlake Boys’; our top stream boys have been extended and motivated by the demanding syllabi delivered by CIE but accessible enough by a greater range of ability than initially thought.” *Nathan Villars, Deputy Headmaster in Charge of CIE, Westlake Boys’ High School*

What is CIE?

CIE stands for “University of Cambridge International Examinations”. The University of Cambridge owns and operates CIE through its non-profit division, Cambridge Assessment, which is one of the largest and oldest examining bodies in the world. It oversees three examination boards – OCR (Oxford, Cambridge and Royal Society) which assesses UK students, another assesses ESOL students worldwide, while CIE, which is the international branch, assesses students in over 150 countries across the world. CIE is the largest global provider of qualifications, with exams taken by over one million students.

What CIE qualifications exist?

There are three levels: IGCSE, AS and A Level.

IGCSE is sat mostly in Year 11. Students normally sit 5-6 subjects. Grades range from A* to G. Students who do not achieve a grade are Ungraded (U).

AS is usually sat in Years 12 and 13. Students sit 4-5 subjects. Qualifications at AS level are accepted for entry to University.

A Level is a two-year course of which the first half is AS and the second half is A2. Grades for both AS and A Level range from A to E (also U if ungraded).

As well as grades, students are awarded percentage marks.

CIE is a standards-based qualification

CIE is **not** norm-referenced – it is a standards-based qualification. Standards are maintained through the use of experienced examining panels while statistical processes are used to ensure consistency of grades, both between subjects and within each subject.

CIE & UK qualifications are not the same

Like the International Baccalaureate, CIE is an international examination. IB has its headquarters in Switzerland, CIE in the UK.

A common misconception is that the UK system is the same as CIE. While CIE exams are based on the UK structure, the format and content has been designed for an international market. In addition, CIE is not a modular system, like that used in the UK. Some UK schools consider CIE to be a more rigorous qualification and this has led to an increasing number of UK independent schools preferring to offer CIE.

The following extract about IGCSE is from Dulwich College’s website: *‘It is an examination which is ...recognized by every university in the world, is often more exacting than the British standard and is being taken by an increasing number of schools which find the current standard not demanding enough for their pupils.’*

CIE courses are suitable for NZ students

CIE syllabi are designed for the international market, not the UK. There are, of course, some subjects (eg Mathematics and Physics) where course content is much the same worldwide, irrespective of country or qualification system.

In other subjects, NZ examples are incorporated. For example, in English, Katherine Mansfield’s work is included, while a recently published CIE anthology includes the works of four NZ poets. In others such as Geography and Art local examples form part of the course.

In addition, CIE provides flexibility to develop courses specially for NZ requirements. NZ History is an AS course developed, examined and marked in NZ with course approval and moderation by CIE.

CIE is not just about external written examinations

While end-of-course, written, external examinations are standard in most CIE subjects, they are not the only form of assessment. Practical examinations are common in science subjects, while internally assessed work is also included in others. Other forms of assessment include portfolios (assessed externally), while speaking and oral tests are standard in foreign language assessment.

CIE assesses a wide range of skills and students are required to use high level thinking processes that go well beyond rote learning

In all subjects, CIE requires students to demonstrate higher-level thinking. To gain high grades, students must show they can apply critical analysis as well as subject knowledge.

For example, in IGCSE History, students are required to:

“Analyse relationships between a wide range of events, people, ideas and changes. Their explanations and analyses of causes and consequences of events and changes are well substantiated...”

“Evaluate and use critically a range of sources to investigate issues and to reach reasoned and substantiated conclusions. They can explain how and why differences exist in the ways in which events and issues are interpreted and they can evaluate these interpretations...”

CIE students have been very successful in the Scholarship Examinations (often despite course differences), in which they are required to “demonstrate high levels of critical thinking, abstraction and generalisation and the ability to integrate, synthesise and apply knowledge, skills, understanding and ideas to complex situations”.

CIE’s system of marking and moderation is transparent; students, teachers and parents receive feedback and results can be checked

Teachers involved in marking coursework (the internally assessed components of CIE) receive training (either in person or through on-line programmes) before being accredited. In addition, CIE carries out moderation of all coursework to ensure consistency of standards.

Similarly, while examinations for NZ-based subjects are written and marked locally, both papers and students’ scripts are moderated by CIE.

CIE’s website provides specimen papers and a range of past examination papers, together with reports from examiners and answer guides.

Any student may apply to have results checked. This is a very comprehensive service offering eight possible ways for a paper to be checked from a clerical re-check of marks through to a review of marks, a report and a return of scripts. Not only is the service extremely comprehensive, but students can expect to get the results within 30 days of receipt of enquiry. An appeal process also exists. Teachers describe the checking service as “unbelievably comprehensive”.

CIE qualifications are accepted worldwide

CIE qualifications are recognised worldwide and accepted at leading universities overseas. The Universities and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS) has deemed that CIE qualifications are to be accepted as equivalent to UK qualifications. Thus they are portable and internationally recognised, and students can use them to enter tertiary institutions not only in New Zealand, but in all other countries.

Countries offering CIE

CIE exams are sat in more than 150 countries, including the US and many European countries. In some countries they provide alternatives to the national system, while in others (such as Singapore) the national system has been developed in conjunction with CIE. Statements that CIE is offered only in third world countries are untrue and misleading, just as is the assertion that CIE is elitist!

CIE is a valid choice for schools

The primary focus for any school should be on the needs of its students and on improving their achievement. CIE schools are no different to others in this respect – they have simply made a different decision about the qualification they believe is most appropriate for their students. No school adopts CIE without a very rigorous investigation into its suitability for its students. Many CIE schools report high levels of motivation and excellent work attitudes following the adoption of CIE.

Judgements about league tables and schools promoting themselves are not confined to any group of schools. Regular news about NCEA successes testifies to the fact that all schools are concerned about how their students perform (and should be performing). Results also provide a source of comparative feedback to schools – not just between schools but also from year to year within a school.

For further information please contact us.