

Equivalence of Hong Kong qualifications in the UK

1. Schools

For 2010, there are two public examinations – the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE), taken at the end of Secondary 5 (age 17) and the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKALE), taken at the end of Secondary 7 (age 19). However, under Hong Kong's education reform, students entering Secondary 4 in September 2009 will be the first to prepare for the new Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination, a three-year programme which will be examined for the first time in 2012. This will replace both the HKCEE and HKALE. HKCEE will be sat by all students for the last time in 2010 and HKALE in 2012, except for those repeating the exams privately in 2011 and 2013 respectively.

HKCEE

Non-language subjects

In HKCEE, performance of candidates is reported in terms of six grades (A-F). Grade C or above is recognised as the equivalent of an O-level pass in a UK GCE examination.

Language subjects: Chinese Language and English Language

With effect from 2007, a new reporting system has been adopted for the subjects of Chinese Language and English Language. Candidates' performance is reported using levels referenced to a set of standards. Under the new reporting system, Grades A-F have been replaced by Levels 1-5, with Level 5 being the highest and Level 1 the lowest. The best-performing Level 5 candidates are awarded Level 5*. A 'Level 2' performance in these two language subjects is needed to meet entry requirements for the Hong Kong A-Level Examination (HKALE).

HKALE

In HKALE, grade E or above in all A-level and AS-level subjects is recognised as equivalent to an A-level pass and an AS-level pass respectively in a GCE examination conducted by a UK awarding body.

Grade comparisons of HKCEE AND HKALE with UK qualifications

With examination reform in the UK and differing approaches to marking in both Hong Kong and the UK there are now marked differences in grade distribution. In Hong Kong, less than four per cent of papers in both public exams obtain Grade As compared with 19-25 per cent in the UK GCSEs and A-levels. Such results do not reflect the high academic standards achieved by Hong Kong students in other standardised tests, notably the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2006, which placed Hong Kong students first in maths, second in science and third in reading literacy.

In 2008, the National Recognition Information Centre (UK NARIC) conducted a study of the grade equivalences and concluded that Hong Kong grades for an examination of comparable academic standard are two grades higher than a GCSE. For A-level, they were found to be two grades higher for Grades D and above, and one grade higher for grades D and E. The outcome of this study has been welcomed by the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority. Some UK institutions have begun lowering their grade requirements for Hong Kong students as a result.

Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE)

In terms of syllabus content, generally compared to GCSE, except for mathematics and the sciences where syllabus content in Hong Kong is considered to be one grade higher. Another exception is the former English Language Syllabus A, for which the standards were lower than for English Language Syllabus B (sat for the last time in 2006), and the new-format HKCEE English and Chinese language papers introduced in 2007 (see below). This comparison, however, does

not take into account different marking approaches and grade distribution for the UK and HK exams.

UK NARIC's 2007 study concludes grades in Hong Kong for subjects of the same academic standard will be two grades higher than for GCSE and issued the following grade comparison for non-language subjects:

Hong Kong Grade	UK Equivalent/s
A	A*
B	A*, A
C	A, B
D	B, C
E	C, D
F	E, F and G
U	U

UK NARIC also compared the HKCEE with the International General Certificate of Education (IGCSE), which provides more clear-cut comparisons. Based on an analysis of the cumulative percentages of the grades in each grading system, the following equivalence table was produced:

HKCEE vs. IGCSE:

Hong Kong Grade	UK Equivalent(s)
A	A*
B	A*
C	A
D	B
E	C, D
F	D, E, F and G
U	U

HKCEE English has been benchmarked against the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) English as a Second Language examination by Cambridge Assessment, and Chinese against the IGCSE equivalent for a first language. The HKCEE results in Chinese Language and English Language are equivalent to IGCSE results as follows:

Levels attained in HKCEE	5*	5	4	3
Grades attained in IGCSE	A*	A	B	C

The new marking system for English and Chinese will be adopted for all subjects when the new Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education is phased in from 2009. For more information about the new format, visit www.hkeaa.edu.hk (click on 'HKCEE' and then 'Grade Descriptors & Standard-reference Reporting (SRR)').

HKCEE grade distribution

As a general guide to performance, the following figures provide percentages of the grades achieved in selected subjects by day school candidates in 2009 and 2010.

Subject	Percentage of levels awarded							
		5*	5 or above	4 or above	3 or above	2 or above	1 or above	Results unclassified
Chinese Language	2010	2.2	6.1	20.2	41.9	75.2	94.6	5.4
	2009	2.5	7.4	18.5	44.9	74.6	93.4	6.6
	2008	2.7	7.5	19.5	46.0	75.0	94.2	5.8
English Language	2010	1.5	7.4	19.9	43.2	68.2	88.1	11.9
	2009	1.4	7.0	19.6	43.8	69.1	88.2	11.8
	2008	1.5	7.2	18.0	42.5	68.1	87.7	12.3

Subject	HKCEE Percentage awarded Grade A	Grades A-C
Biology		
2010	3.8	33.6
2009	4.2	33.5
2008	4.1	32.1
Chemistry		
2010	4.1	31.8
2009	4.1	32.1
2008	3.8	32.0
Computer and Information Technology		
2010	2.9	24.4
2009	2.7	23.9
2008	2.6	22.8
Economics		
2010	3.3	24.6
2009	2.8	24.0
2008	3.1	23.7
Mathematics		
2010	3.8	30.6
2009	3.7	30.6
2008	3.5	30.7
Physics		
2010	4.3	31.8
2009	4.1	30.1
2008	4.1	28.9

Source: Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority

Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKALE)

Grades A to E are generally compared to GCE A-level except for mathematics and the sciences where Hong Kong grades are considered to be one grade higher in terms of academic difficulty. According to the UK-NARIC study, grades in Hong Kong for subjects of the same academic standard will be two grades higher than for GCE A-levels for grades D and above and one grade

higher below that, based on an analysis of the cumulative percentages of the grades in each grading system.

HKALE vs. GCE A-level:

Hong Kong Grade	UK Equivalent/s
A	A
B	A
C	A
D	B
E	C/D
F	D/E
U	U

The **HKALE 'Use of English'** is a Hong Kong AS-level subject. It serves as an English entrance requirement for admission into higher education in Hong Kong. HKEAA has conducted a research study to equate performance levels with the IELTS. The following table gives for each grade level respective equivalent IELTS band scores:

HKALE Use of English Grade	Equivalent Range of Overall IELTS Band Score
A	7.41 – 8.30
B	6.92 – 7.40
C	6.51 – 6.91
D	6.03 – 6.50
E	5.40 – 6.02

HKALE grade distribution

As a general guide to performance, the following figures provide percentages of the grades achieved in selected subjects by day school candidates in 2010.

	HKALE percentage awarded Grade A	HKALE percentage awarded Grades A-C
Biology	2.5	20.2
Chemistry	3.3	24.0
Chinese Language and Culture	2.4	26.5
Computer Studies	4.8	31.4
Economics	4.5	25.2
Physics	4.1	25.0
Pure Mathematics	4.7	26.6
Use of English	1.0	15.3

Source: Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority(2010)

Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) Examination

The HKDSE Examination is designed to assess the full range of achievement of candidates with different abilities, taken at the end of six years of secondary education, and replacing the HKCEE and HKALE. The first examination will be held in 2012. Most students will be aged 18 by the September after completing the HKDSE, instead of 19 now. They will have completed 15 years of schooling, including three years of subsidised kindergarten, and six years each of primary and secondary education.

There will be three modes of reporting for the HKDSE.

Category A subjects (core subjects of Chinese, English, Mathematics and Liberal Studies, and 20 elective subjects), will be reported using standards-referencing in five levels, (1-5), with Level 1 being the lowest and Level 5 the highest. Achievements below Level 1 will be designated "unclassified". Top candidates within Level 5 will be awarded Level 5* and Level 5**. Levels 4, 5, 5* and 5** will be set with a reference to the standards achieved by candidates awarded grades A – D in the current HKALE. As such, equivalences should be similar to current equivalences between UK A-levels and HKALE.

Category B Applied Learning subjects will be assessed by course providers. After moderation by HKEAA, the final results will be recorded on the HKDSE certificate. The results will be reported as "Attained" and "Attained with distinction". "Attained with Distinction" will be comparable to Level 3 and above in Core and Elective subjects.

Category C subjects (Other Languages) will be conducted by Cambridge International Examinations (CIE), based on AS-level examinations for French, German, Hindi, Japanese, Spanish and Urdu. They will be reported from Grade A-E, with Grade A the highest.

UCAS Tariff for HKDSE

The HKEAA commissioned UCAS to review the HKDSE for inclusion in the UCAS Tariff, with the results now published on the UCAS and HKEAA websites.

The UCAS Tariff compares the HKDSE favourably with GCE A-levels, with Level 5* in the new exam comparable in UCAS points to Grade A to A* in GCE A-levels, Level 5 comparable to Grade A, Level 4 equal to Grade C, and Level 3 equal to Grade E. The UCAS tariff did not compare Level 2 with A or AS-levels.

Levels Two and One are now being benchmarked against international qualifications, including UK. Work on this benchmarking is expected to be complete by the end of 2010.

The UCAS Tariff details for 23 Category A core and elective subjects in the HKDSE, excluding Mathematics, is follows:

HKDSE	UCAS tariff	Comparability to 2010 GCE A-level
5**	NA	To be allocated after 2012
5*	130	Between Grades A and A*
5	120	Grade A
4	80	Grade C
3	40	Grade E

UCAS Tariff points allocated to Mathematics:

The overall performance and comparison with GCE A-level is indicated by the combine tariff points for both compulsory and extended parts.

HKDSE	Compulsory Part	Extended Part	Comparability to 2010 GCE A-level
5**	NA	NA	To be allocated after 2012
5*	60	70	Eg: 130 points (60+70) for 5* in both compulsory and extended parts – between Grades A and A* 120 points (60+60) for 5* in the compulsory part and 5 in the extended part – comparable to Grade A 65 points (40+25) comparable to between Grades E and C.
5	45	60	
4	35	50	
3	25	40	

A number of UK universities have announced that they will accept students direct to undergraduate programmes with the HKDSE, with offers ranging from 555* to 3333+Applied Learning Attained with Distinction.

For more information about the HKDSE and its international recognition, visit www.hkeaa.edu.hk

Hong Kong Higher Level Examination (HKHL)

HKHL has not been offered since June 1992. It is generally considered to compare with the Scottish Higher and is between GCSE and A-level standard.

2. Further and higher education

- a. **Craft and technician level** - qualifications leading to diploma and certificates generally comparable to an appropriate qualification of the City and Guilds Institute, the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LCCI), and Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC).
- b. **Project Yi Jin (formerly known as Project Springboard Certificate)**
Project Yi Jin is delivered by eight member institutions of the Federation for Continuing Education in Tertiary Institutions. Secondary Five school leavers and adult learners aged 21 or above may enrol in the programme. It usually takes one year to complete for full-time students, while part-time students usually need two years. For continuous education and employment purposes, the qualification obtained by Project Yi Jin graduates is comparable to five passes in HKCEE. However, the qualification is not recognised for enrolment in HKALE courses. Alternatively, Project Yi Jin graduates can enrol in Diploma, Associate degree, then Bachelor degree programmes.
- c. **Certificate/Diploma** - generally considered comparable to BTEC / Edexcel National Diploma / SQA National Certificates or Diploma.
- d. **Higher certificate** - generally considered to be comparable to a BTEC / Edexcel Higher National Certificate / SQA National Certificate.
- e. **Higher diploma** - generally considered to be comparable to a BTEC / Edexcel Higher

National Diploma / SQA National Diploma.

- f. **Associate degree (AD)** - The AD programme can be a two-year programme normally admitting students with one HKALE or an equivalent number of HK AS-level subjects; or a three-year programme admitting Secondary Five graduates. For a three-year curriculum, the first year programme may take the form of either a stand-alone pre-AD or a Foundation course that forms an integral part of an AD programme. As an exit qualification for further studies, an AD award is normally equivalent to one-third of a three-year university degree (UK model). In other words, AD graduates can articulate to Year Two of a three-year university degree (UK model), although there is no official benchmarking for articulation.
- g. **Professional diploma** – these diplomas are generally considered to be comparable to academic requirements for corporate membership of professional institutions. They are also generally considered to be of a higher standard than higher diplomas. They are no longer being offered.
- h. **Honours diploma (Hong Kong Baptist College¹ [until 1993] and Lingnan College² [until 1991])** – these diplomas have been compared in standard to professional diplomas. Some students, with grade point average (GPA) in excess of 2.8 have been accepted into UK Master's degrees in some relevant subject areas.
- i. **Honours diploma (Hong Kong Shue Yan College³ [until 2006])** – they have been compared to UK Diplomas of Higher Education (DipHE). However, some universities and professional associations in China, UK, USA, France and Australia recognise the four-year Honours Diploma programmes as degree equivalent and accept the graduates to Master's degree programmes in some areas. Hong Kong Shue Yan College launched its four-year degree programmes in September 2001 and the first batch of degree students graduated in July 2005.
- j. **Bachelor's degree** - Current honours degrees can generally be compared to UK Bachelor (Honours) degree standard, pass degrees to UK Bachelor (Pass) degree standard, ordinary degrees to UK ordinary degree standard. The usual length of study for a university degree in Hong Kong is three years for both arts and science bachelor's awards. Some dual degrees where elite students obtain two degrees may last for four years. The degree structure in Hong Kong will change under the education reforms, with the first undergraduates entering a new four-year first degree structure in 2012. Specialist subject study will be complemented by more liberal-arts style general education.
- k. **Postgraduate diploma/Master's degree/Research degree** – they are generally considered to be comparable to the standard of those awarded by UK institutions.

3. University of Macau

Degrees from the University of Macau are not recognised by the Hong Kong government and are generally not accepted by UK institutions for one year postgraduate study. The East Asia Open Institute, which was affiliated with the university, is now called the Asia International Open University, and offers distance learning degree programmes, based on Open University (UK) units. However, these degrees are normally compared to ordinary degrees (192 credits are required for ordinary degrees and 256 credits for honours degrees). It is, therefore, advisable to look closely at

¹ Hong Kong Baptist College offered its first degree programmes in 1986 and was officially renamed Hong Kong Baptist University in 1994.

² Lingnan College was granted degree-awarded status in 1991 and renamed Lingnan University in 1999.

³ Hong Kong Shue Yan College attained university status and was formally called Hong Kong Shue Yan University on 18 December 2006. It was the first private university in Hong Kong.

transcripts and the course contents in order to assess students' abilities.

4. Chu Hai College of Higher Education

Chu Hai College of Higher Education, formerly known as Chu Hai College, registered as an Approved Post Secondary College under the Post Secondary Colleges Ordinance in July 2004. It was granted approval to award degrees in October 2004.

The four-year degree qualifications conferred by Chu Hai College before September 2004 are not recognised by the Hong Kong Government. Evaluation of its standard is difficult as there is no external validation for the courses. Generally the degrees are not regarded of UK standard. However, some UK institutions have taken graduates onto their master's programmes provided they have demonstrated relevant work experience and good GPA as well as an acceptable English level.

5. The Open University of Hong Kong (OUHK)

The OUHK (formerly The Open Learning Institute of Hong Kong) was the first government established institution in Hong Kong to offer open and distance learning education. It started accepting students in October 1989 and operates an open access policy, whereby those over the age of 17 can enrol without academic qualifications. Degree programmes have been developed under each of its four schools (Arts and Social Sciences, Business and Administration, Education and Languages, Science and Technology) and one centre, Li Ka Shing Institute of Professional and Continuing Education (LiPACE, formerly named the Centre for Continuing and Community Education). Minimum time to complete a degree is three years for an ordinary degree (120 credits) and four years for an honours degree (160 credits). The first honours degree students graduated in June 1993. The OUHK currently has more than 18,000 students spread across distance learning and full time programmes as well as professional and CE courses.

Appendix I – Useful websites

Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority

www.hkeaa.edu.hk

(For information on HKCEE, HKALE and Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education, HKDSE)

Education Bureau

www.edb.gov.hk

(For information on Hong Kong education, Project Yi Jin and Associate degrees)

Senior Secondary Education and Higher Education New Academic Structure 334 Web Bulletin

www.edb.gov.hk/334

(The site may be a useful resource for partners keen to keep abreast with the implementation of the new structure)

Information Portal for Accredited Self-Financing Sub-degree Programmes (iPASS)

www.ipass.gov.hk

(For a list of full-time Accredited Self-Financing Sub-degree, degree and top-up degree programmes)

Vocational Training Council (VTC)

www.vtc.edu.hk

(For information on vocational qualifications provided by VTC)

Construction Industry Council*

www.hkcic.org

(The Construction Industry Training Authority was amalgamated with the Construction Industry Council on 1 January 2008)

Clothing Industry Training Authority

www.clothingtraining.org.hk

(For information on vocational qualifications provided by Clothing Industry Training Authority)

Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ)

(Formerly the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation)

(For information on the new Qualifications Framework and Register)

www.hkcaavq.edu.hk

Hong Kong Shue Yan University

www.hksyu.edu

University of Macau

www.umac.mo

Chu Hai College of Higher Education

www.chuhai.edu.hk

The Open University of Hong Kong

www.ouhk.edu.hk

University Grants Committee

www.ugc.edu.hk

(For information on tertiary education)

OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)

www.pisa.oecd.org

Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ)

www.hkcaa.edu.hk (For the list of post-secondary programmes accredited by HKCAAVQ)

(Last updated: August 2010)