

## International Benchmarking and Subject Analysis of the International Secondary Certificate (ISC) of the Independent Examinations Board (IEB)

Submitted to the IEB by Ecctis

### Scope and Methodology

Ecctis has been commissioned by the Independent Examinations Board (IEB) – a South African assessment agency – to undertake an international benchmarking of their new school-leaving qualification: the International Secondary Certificate (ISC).

The ISC is designed to provide an international upper-secondary qualification with its roots in southern Africa. It has been developed out of the IEB's provision of the South African National Senior Certificate (NSC), which will no longer take place internationally (outside of South Africa) after 2021. From 2022, the ISC will begin implementation for students starting Grade 10 and by transitioning students across from the NSC to the ISC in Grades 11 and 12. First assessment therefore takes place in 2022.

The typical duration of the programme will be three years (Grades 10-12), with the requirement that students have an official Grade 9 report or equivalent to enable entry. Full-time, classroom-based learning is the normal expectation, though part-time and distance-learning flexibilities will also be offered. To achieve ISC certification students must achieve a minimum of 130 credits, to be made up of a minimum of six 20-credit or 36-credit subjects and at least one 10-credit Competence for Lifelong Learning subject. ISC students must study a Primary Language, a further language (at Additional Language level at least), and their language of instruction (English or Afrikaans) must be studied at either Primary or Additional Level. Depending on subject-level achievements, the ISC will be awarded as either: the ISC; the ISC Merit; or the ISC Advanced. Certificates will also display grades achieved in every subject passed.

Ecctis has deployed its established qualification benchmarking methodology in order to ascertain the international comparability of the ISC in the context of the Australian (New South Wales), UK, and Kenyan education systems. The emphasis has been on establishing the comparable level of the qualification in each system. Programme review involved analysis of qualification aims, entry requirements, duration, structure and content, learning outcomes, mode of learning and assessment and associated outcomes. The process was supported by in-depth review of underpinning quality assurance processes used by the IEB.

The core study has been supported by more in-depth comparative subject analyses in relation to the similarities and differences between ISC curricula and New South Wales (Higher School Certificate), UK (AS/A Levels), and Kenyan (KCSE) comparison points in English, Mathematics, French, Geography, Biology, and Physical Sciences (Physics and Chemistry).

## Key Findings

- The ISC is designed to develop a range of transferrable and higher order thinking skills, as well as competences related to active citizenry and lifelong learning.
- The ISC curriculum framework offers students a wide variety of subject options, with typically six 20-credit subjects and one 10-credit Competence for Lifelong Learning being studied over the course of three years. Further Studies options, worth 30 or 36 credits, are available in specific subjects and offer a greater depth of engagement with the subject.
- Appropriate quality assurance processes are in place, with the inclusion of Stellenbosch University's Unit for International Credentialling (SU-UIC) adding a useful level of externality in assuring a pre-university qualification.
- Ecctis found that the ISC assessment methods have been appropriately designed to provide a valid and reliable assessment of the intended learning outcomes. School-based assessment is combined with summative external examinations and other summative assessment tasks such as oral/practical examinations where relevant within subjects.
- Where differences were found between ISC subject curricula and curricula in other international programmes, these were often based on differences in content-priorities coherent with the differing aims and contexts for which the respective curricula have been developed.<sup>1</sup>
- There is a diverse range of language-related subjects available for ISC students. Stakeholders should note that differently structured ISC language curricula develop different levels of language proficiency. ISC documentation notes that Elementary Level Language courses target CEFR levels A1/A2, Language in Practice courses target A2/B1, Additional Language courses B1/B2, Primary Language courses C1/C2, and Further Studies would require proficiency at C2 level to study effectively.

## Comparability Against the Australian, UK, and Kenyan Education Systems

Ecctis has developed three comparability statements which compare the ISC to the education systems of Australia, the UK, and Kenya respectively. These demonstrate Ecctis' holistic judgement of the level of the ISC, which takes into account all core elements of programme design, along with the detailed subject-level analysis.

### Australia

Like the New South Wales HSC, the ISC is a school-leaving qualification with expectations that students have achieved certain prior qualifications or successfully completed lower-secondary education. Both qualifications aim to develop higher order thinking skills, there are many similarities in the assessment methods used, and a similar number of subjects are studied by students, suggesting the awards are of comparable breadth. Whilst the weightings of individual assessment components and question types may vary from subject-to-subject,

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<sup>1</sup> Differences include, for example, coverage of geography topics with particular local relevance and emphasis on regional canons of literature within language subjects.

the ISC tests a comparable range competences and knowledge. Differences were noted at subject-level, but as with the findings for other countries, these generally reflect different aims and cultural contexts for which the HSC and ISC have been designed. The ISC was found comparable to the HSC in New South Wales, and the Australian Senior Secondary Certificate of Education standard.

<b>Qualification title</b>	International Secondary Certificate (ISC)
<b>Awarded by:</b>	The Independent Examinations Board (IEB)
<b>Comparison</b>	Is considered comparable to the Australian Senior Secondary Certificate of Education standard. In New South Wales, this level is represented by the Higher School Certificate.

### England, Wales, and Northern Ireland

Like the GCE AS/A Level, the ISC is a school-leaving qualification with expectations that students have achieved certain prior qualifications or successfully completed lower-secondary education. Both qualifications aim to develop higher order thinking skills and there are many similarities in the assessment methods used. Whilst the weightings of individual assessment components and question types may vary from subject-to-subject, the ISC tests a comparable range competences and knowledge. Differences were noted at subject-level, but these generally reflect different aims and cultural contexts. The second year of A Level subjects were generally found to contain further depth of content than ISC 20-credit subjects, though the ISC Further Studies curricula were found comparable to A Level standard. The complexity of content in 20-credit ISC subjects was generally found comparable to the UK AS Level standard.

<b>Qualification title</b>	International Secondary Certificate (ISC)
<b>Awarded by:</b>	The Independent Examinations Board (IEB)
<b>Comparison</b>	Is considered comparable to GCE Advanced Subsidiary (AS) level standard.  Each 20-credit subject passed is at least comparable to GCSE grades A*-C, provided a mark of 50%/D has been obtained. Further Studies (30- or 36-credit) subjects are considered comparable to the overall GCE Advanced (A) level standard. In relation to study of foreign or second languages, stakeholders should consider the target CEFR-level proficiency of the ISC subject in question (Elementary Level Language = A1/A2; Language in Practice = A2/B1; Additional Language = B1/B2).

### Kenya

Like the KCSE, the ISC is a school-leaving qualification involving a similar number of subjects studied. Both qualifications aim to develop higher order thinking skills and there are many

similarities in the assessment methods used. Differences were noted at subject-level, but these generally reflect different aims and cultural contexts. ISC subjects demonstrated greater depth than KCSE comparison points in some areas. ISC Further Studies curricula were particularly notable for the higher levels of complexity and depth in subject content compared to KCSE curricula. As a result, Ecctis recommends that Kenyan HEIs may consider ISC students for advanced entrance to Bachelor degree programmes in relevant subjects, taking into account subjects studied and grades achieved.

<b>Qualification title</b>	International Secondary Certificate (ISC)
Awarded by:	The Independent Examinations Board (IEB)
<b>Comparison</b>	Is considered comparable to Kenyan Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) standard. Kenyan HEIs may, at institutional discretion, consider ISC students for advanced standing to Bachelor degree programmes in relevant subjects, taking into account subjects studied and grades achieved.