



Guide to

# May 2021 IB Exams

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# What has changed and how can I best prepare?



This guide is written for students, parents and educators affected by May 2021 IB exam changes. With students and families experiencing so much disruption since March 2020, and with information being drip-fed from the IB around May 2021 exam changes, we've worked hard to compile a reference and advisory guide to address the confirmed changes, how this impacts you, and what you can do to ensure you still obtain the highest possible IB score.

The Elite IB team is comprised of IB graduates and trained IB professionals. The information below has been written in collaboration with IB school teachers and leaders.

Last updated: October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020

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## Useful Links

- [May 2021 exam schedule](#)
- [Updates for 2020-21 Learning, Teaching and Assessment](#)
- [IB blog and advice around ongoing changes](#)

## Ask your IB coordinator for early access to:

1. "M21 adapted assessment: Modified marks, weightings and examination times"
2. "Addendum for May 2021 (only) guidance on internal and other non-examination coursework assessment components"

# 1

## What happened in May 2020?

May 2020 was unbelievably difficult and complex for the IBO. Being one of the earliest examination schedules of any school-leaving qualification, with exams starting in late April, they were one of the worst impacted of all global examination bodies.

You will no doubt have read various takes on how things took place, but ultimately the salient points are:

- Shortly after COVID struck, on the assumption that exams would happen, the IBO extended the period for schools to submit Internal Assessments (IAs)
- When it became clear that exams would not go ahead, but before this was officially confirmed, the IB then changed this policy and asked all schools to submit all IAs - an early sign that the IAs would count towards a larger portion of the final scores awarded
- This left the IBO, and its schools, in a difficult position. Some schools had already submitted, whilst others now had visibility on the importance of IAs and worked with their students to ensure top scores
- IB exams were officially cancelled around March 30<sup>th</sup>
- The IBO worked with a 3rd party data science company to create an algorithm which gave IB scores based on three factors: internal assessment scores (all examined by IB examiners), submitted school predicted scores, and a school metric. This school metric was based on factors such as how long they had been doing the IB, the size of the cohort, previous predictions and more. The weightings of the algorithm were never revealed.
- Results came out on July 6<sup>th</sup> and there was a significant backlash from the IBO community, with certain regions feeling they were worse affected than others
- The IBO initially allowed 'Enquiries upon results' (read: remarks) to extend to entire subject cohorts (ie Geography) and indeed school cohorts where all awarded grades were re-examined. This extended to remarking the IAs as well as presumably some re-review of the way school data was entered.
- With continued pushback from IB world schools, the IBO were forced to work with schools to revise the manner in which grades were awarded
- The IBO then re-released all grades for students based on a revised system on August 17<sup>th</sup>, which removed the school component and only assessed the IAs & predicted scores. Under this new system, IB scores could not go down - and so there was minor grade inflation on previous years. See more [here](#).

We recorded a video which can be found on our website, or by clicking the link below:

Haven't got time to read? Watch our Loom video on this topic: <https://www.loom.com/share/50cc29e02cda4ccfa391c4854e1a77db>





## 2 What changes did they make for November 2020?

Although there was longer for the IBO to address November 2020 exams, clearly students entered for this exam session were still disrupted in a way no-one could have predicted. The IB worked with schools, asking if they could safely run exams. The IB's official documentation suggests that 73% of schools said they could safely run exam sessions and so exams are going ahead. The assumption presumably was if less than 50% said yes, they wouldn't run the exam session, but a majority decision was the most democratic way of finding a solution.

The exam schedule, and the components constituting the exam (IAs & written exam papers), have not been changed. However, the IB have once again (as per May 2020) asked for all IA components to be submitted to the IB for official marking. Whether this introduces better efficacy remains to be seen, but this policy gives the IB the fallback plan that if for whatever reason exams do need to be cancelled at a certain school, they can use a similar system to the one implemented in May 2020.

The big issue here is that there will be a two-tier system for awarded grades - those students who do sit exams and those who don't. The November exams are mostly offered in schools in the southern hemisphere and in some countries where COVID has badly affected the regional IB schools, Brazil as one example. The question then is - how does a university, or an employer gauge a November 2020 grade? At least May 2020 all students went through the same grading and examination system, so even if not perfect, students were at least 'examined' in the same way. Even if there was no consistency from school to school in terms of support for IAs, predicted scores being awarded etc, at least all students were assessed using the same summative system.

Finally, the IB allowed schools a longer period to submit their IAs, which went from September 15th to October 20th.

For more information on the November session, please read the [IB's COVID response](#), and the [IB November exam timetable](#).



# 3 How can I access the May 2021 exam schedule?

The exam schedule is available [here](#).





## 4 What are the May 2021 exams which have already been released?

The IBO has come out early in a bid both to give schools and students as much warning as possible, but naturally also to cover themselves in terms of potential kick-back from various stakeholders about not forward planning. It goes without saying that everyone in the IB ecosystem will have suffered (some more than others) from the various issues from COVID, and so the sensible solution has ultimately been to make 'reductions' - either on terms of **what** is examined from a syllabus/content perspective, or **removing** entire assessment components, reducing the skillset students need to develop for exam readiness. This is certainly the right decision.

Due to reduced school teaching time, subjects have either had exam durations reduced (from, for example 1hr30 to 1hr) as there is less content to assess, or simply that papers have been removed entirely. Given the thousands of potential subject combinations, it is best to assess how this impacts you on a subject-by-subject basis.

The hope here is clearly to be as equitable to as many students undertaking the IBDP as possible, whilst also balancing the fact that students take a breadth of subjects, all of which are affected in their own way, and so balance must be struck both across schools but also subject combinations.

Where it is easier to move some of the bulk of the exam to coursework (for example, Literature) this has been done. Where it is harder (for example, experimental sciences which require lab work) the IA components have not increased and more emphasis will go towards the exams, even if they themselves have been reduced in length or format, they still count for more of the overall grade awarded.

A full breakdown of which changes have been made can be found via [this link](#).

The IB's official statement for the reasons behind the changes are:



*"In response to requests from our community to mitigate the loss of instructional time and logistical challenges" and to "help IB schools plan for a manageable, practical and achievable teaching and learning experience in the new school year".*

*The loss of class time, engagement with peers and of course students and schools struggling to adapt to an online or blended learning environment means changes had to be made, and the sooner the better for the whole IB ecosystem.*

The IB's lexicon for the 3 types of changes they're making are:

- Amendments to assessment components and requirements
  - Read: Changing the way in which you're being assessed and examined. For example, removal of the Group 4 project as some students can't access their labs.
- Removal of components or requirements
  - Read: removing parts of the syllabus or content, some of which you may already have covered in school. For example, removing Paper 3 (the option paper) from the science papers.
- The use of in-session mitigations
  - Read: Unclear! Likely to either mean easier exams, or a lower bell-curve for grade awarding and attainment.

The kickback the IB have been met with is that they of course have had to make different decisions for different subjects, meaning that not only will teachers be affected in terms of how they teach and assess students, but as students are taking 6 subjects, some will naturally be more affected than others. The more literature you read, the better you will understand how you are directly impacted by the changes.

So, although the changes are quite vast, changes which are directly impactful on most students are

- Maths has no direct change other than 'in session mitigations' - ie most likely they may make the exam slightly easier to allow for the reduced teaching time and exam readiness.
- Language A - Paper two removed. As Paper 2 counted for 25% at SL and 35% at HL, that has meant a re-balancing amongst the other components. Oral exams can now take place remotely, over Skype or a similar medium.
- Sciences - Group 4 project removed. The Group 4 project was a cornerstone of the science subjects, but as so many schools can't safely get students into labs, it is sadly a non-starter for students this year. As the Group 4 did not count towards your final grade and was rather a binary check on your work, there is no ultimate effect on how your grades are awarded. "The project exists to promote collaborative and multi-disciplinary work between students."
  - Perhaps more tangibly, OPTIONS papers have been fully removed (paper three). These used to be taught at the end of the second year of the IB so should not really impact students as much in terms of their preparation. The unfortunate downside here is that students tended to score quite well in Paper 3, especially for Physics.

The IB's official document: "M21 adapted assessment: Modified marks, weightings and examination times" is the best place to see a full breakdown. This is an official IB document, so you will need to speak to your school to gain access to this document. We strongly advise that you read it as soon as possible!



# 5 What has happened to internal assessments and how do I best prepare for them?

Internal assessments have always been a core part of the IB’s summative assessment of your performance. The weighting of the IA varies from subject to subject, typically tallying a larger percentage for humanities (Language A = 50%) than STEM subjects (Maths = 20%).

Perhaps more importantly, **all internal assessments will be graded by the IB**. In usual years, your school grades the IAs and then sends off a few examples to the IBO to mark, and the entire cohort are then either marked up or down based on those samples, as a way of validating the teacher’s judgement. When your teacher is marking your IAs, there will be an undeniable bias where they understand your style of communication and writing, and typically internal IA scores are slightly inflated compared with the scores given by IB examiners. As all IA components will now be marked in the same manner as end-of-year exams, **coursework should be considered more important than ever before**.

The IB recently released exact IA weighting changes in a document not yet accessible to students. The table below summarises key subjects, where we have left off Group 6 which is not as easily summarised in such a table. For some subjects (Physics for example) the IA component hasn’t gone up, rather the exam papers will count for more. The argument here is that IAs for sciences are much harder to complete remotely (namely, due to restricted by lab access) and so once again this varies from subject to subject.

	Subject	Standard Level		Higher Level	
		Old	New	Old	New
<b>Group 1</b>	Language A: Literature	30%	45%	20%	25%
	Language A: Language & literature	30%	45%	20%	25%
	Literature & Performance	40%	35%		
<b>Group 2</b>	Language Ab initio	25%	35%		
	Language B	25%	30%	25%	30%
	Classical Languages	20%	30%	20%	30%
<b>Group 3</b>	Business Management	25%	35%	25%	35%
	Economics	20%	30%	20%	25%
	Geography	25%	35%	20%	30%
	Global Politics	25%	40%	20%	20%
	History	25%	25%	20%	20%
	ITGS	30%	30%	20%	20%
	Philosophy	25%	35%	20%	25%
	Pyschology	25%	35%	20%	30%
	Social & Cultural Anthrology	20%	30%	25%	35%
	World Religioins	25%	35%		

	Subject	Standard Level		Higher Level	
		Old	New	Old	New
<b>Group 4</b>	Biology	20%	20%	20%	20%
	Chemistry	20%	20%	20%	20%
	Computer Science	30%	30%	20%	20%
	Design Technology	40%	40%	40%	40%
	Enviromental Systems and Social	25%	25%		
	Nature of Science	30%	30%		
	Physics	20%	35%	20%	20%
	Sports, exercise and health Science	20%	20%	20%	20%
<b>Group 5</b>	Mathematics: Analysis & approach	20%	20%	20%	20%
	Mathematics: Applications & Int	20%	20%	20%	20%

## Physics

### Phycis marks and modified weighting

	Component	Current number of marks	Modified number of marks for M21	Current Weighting	Modified number of marks for M21
<b>SL</b>	Paper 1	30	30	20%	30%
	Paper 2	50	50	40%	50%
	Paper 3	35	Removed	20%	N/A
	IA	24	24	20%	20%
	Total weighting			100%	100%
<b>HL</b>	Paper 1	40	40	20%	30%
	Paper 2	90	90	36%	50%
	Paper 3	45	Removed	24%	N/A
	IA	24	24	20%	20%
	Total weighting			100%	100%

An example of how the IB is sharing this information can be found in the table below:

Figure 1: [www.ibo.org](http://www.ibo.org) - "M21 adapted assessment: Modified marks, weightings and examination times"



## 6 Are elements of the syllabus being removed? Which ones?

The two best references to check in on are the IB's ongoing COVID update page which can be found [here](#), and the document they released concerning direct changes to the May 2021 exam schedule. This varies significantly from course to course, and reviewing [this document in detail](#) (and the appendix at the end of this guide) is a sensible course of action.

Ask your school for a copy of "M21 adapted assessment: Modified marks, weightings and examination times" which all IB coordinators will have access to and should be sharing with their students. This is not a public document and so you must speak to your school directly.



# 7 What is my school doing and how can I work with them? Have the deadlines changed?

Given the mixup for the May 2020 and November 2021 submission deadlines, the IB will no doubt publish revised deadlines for IA submissions for the May 2021 session. The standard dates for official submission is March 15th (though internal school deadlines tend to be earlier for QA processes) and it is likely to be the same this year. Although this was pushed back in the November session from the usual September 15th date to October 20th, it is unlikely to be pushed back further than this for May, as the IB will need to have their team of examiners marking millions of pieces of coursework.





## 8 What is the likelihood of May exams being cancelled and what happens then?

Of course, this is entirely contingent on the developments of COVID, but the short answer is - highly unlikely. The IB are unlikely to introduce remote assessment tools (which would give students the ability to sit their exams at home) as this wouldn't be equitable across all of the regions they offer the DP in. With that in mind, the May exams most likely will follow a similar pattern to November, asking schools how safely they can offer the exam session, and the likely outcome will be similar to November where the majority of schools will offer exams and those where they can't will follow the assessment procedure of using a combination of IAs (graded by the IB) and school predicted scores. With that in mind, do keep an ongoing dialogue with your school to ensure your predicted grades are strong.

## 9 So what does that mean I should do between now and May?

Two things, fundamentally.

1. Treat your internal assessments like exams, and be aware of the deadlines.
2. Ensure your school predicted grades are as strong as they can be - effectively work on the basis that exams won't happen, so that you have covered yourself in terms of the worst case scenario.

Internal assessments should be considered as exams anyway, but this year more than ever. In some instances, IA components are going up to compensate for shorter exams, or exams which will test less of the syllabus. Note of course that not all IA component weightings have changed and you should consult the table in section 5 for more information on this.

# 10

## What about CAS

The IB's official statement reads:



*During these unusual times of social distancing and lockdowns, we understand that completing CAS may be difficult for many students. We will still require schools to indicate a student has completed this requirement, but we will be flexible in how this looks for your students. We have every confidence that you will guide your students in making their best endeavours to meet CAS requirements with modifications so as not to compromise their health and safety.*

So although they haven't said this in black and white, the sad reality is that CAS, although still important, will simply not be assessed or validated in ways it would have been previously. This is understandable, and without the IB effectively striking CAS as a required component, they will clearly be very flexible on a school-by-school basis.



# 11

## Elite IB's Advice on what you do now

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- Speak regularly to your school, attend PTA meetings, and establish a great communication channel to ensure you're both helping each other through this period. Your IB coordinators will be the first to hear of any changes being passed down from the IBO, and the more directly you can be speaking with your school, the sooner you will hear of any changes. Likewise the more supportive you are to your school, the better the whole process will be for everyone.
  - Take your internal assessment very seriously. Download the grading matrices, work with fellow students, your teacher or Elite IB Tutors to ensure you understand how the IAs work, understand what you are being assessed on and how you can achieve top marks.
  - Focus on school grades as much as on exam preparation. Your school's predictions are likely to play a role in your final scores this coming May, so although our usual advice is to start focusing on exam methodology, this year a balance must be struck between exam preparation and a more 'Americanised' system of constant testing and evaluation to gauge your level, rather than only an exam right at the end. Of course, it is never too soon to start working on your exam readiness, but the balance this year should go more towards school grades
  - If your school is offering mock exams in Jan/Feb, then again you should treat these like real exams, as these may be one of the core components schools will use to fine-tune your predictions. These mock exams are usually based on official IB past papers, so be sure to ask your school for some copies as use them as part of your own self-evaluation.
  - Keep an open mind! We know this is a rollercoaster time for you, but feel fortunate that at least you have forewarning, unlike the M20 students. Take each day as it comes, and speak to friends and other families to consolidate your strategy and be sure to work with your school every step of the way.
  - Check back here every few weeks as we keep this document up to speed.
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- [Free IB Resources](#)
  - [Online IB Tuition](#)
  - [IB Winter Revision Courses](#)

# Appendix

## Breakdown of subject changes

### Group 1

#### Language A: Literature

Paper 2 removed - (Essay based on two works) Used to weigh 25%

#### Language A: Language & Literature

Paper 2 removed - (Comparative essay). Used to weigh 35% (at SL, 25% at HL)

#### Literature & Performance

Paper 1 (SL) removed - (Prose and performance) Used to be 20%

### Group 2

#### Language Ab initio

Paper 1 amended - Students answer one question from Section A or B (rather than one from each). Still weighs 25%

Paper 2 amended - listening component removed. Used to weigh 30%

IA amended - students can be shown 5 visual stimuli from each of the five themes (instead of 1). Still weighs 25%

#### Language B

Paper 2 amended - listening component removed. Used to weigh 30%

IA (SL) amended - students can be shown 5 visual stimuli from each of the five themes (instead of 1). Still weighs 25%

IA (HL) amended - students can be shown two literary extracts from a single work (rather than one). Still weighs 25%

#### Classical Languages

Paper 2 removed - Used to be weighed 45%

### Group 3

#### Business Management

##### SL:

Paper 1 amended - (Paper 1 is the pre-released case study) students only answer one (out of three, instead of two out of three) question in Section A. Still weighs

Paper 2 amended - Section C (GUEGIS question) removed. Still weighs 40%.

##### HL

Paper 1 amended - Section C (strategic decision-making compulsory questions) (a section on Paper 1 which only HL students answer) has been removed. Still weighs

Paper 2 amended - Section C (GUEGIS question) removed. Still weighs 35%.

#### Economics

Paper 2 amended - students answer only one question from either Section A (Internal Economics) or Section B (Development Economics) (instead of 1 out of 2 in Section A and 1 out of 2 in Section B). Still weighs 40% (at SL, 30% at HL)



- Section A, where you choose 1 question out of 2, which covers Microeconomics part of the syllabus.
- Section B, where you choose 1 question out of 2, which covers Macroeconomics part of the syllabus.

### **Geography**

Paper 1 amended - answer for only one (Theme) option. Still weighs 35%.

Paper 2 amended - Section C (essay-based question) removed. Still weighs 40% (at SL, 25% at HL)

### **Global Politics**

Paper 1 removed - Core Material. Was weighed 30% (at SL, 20% at HL)

Paper 2 amended (HL) - Students answer only 2 questions (rather than 3). Still weighs 25% (at HL)

IA (HL) amended - Students submit only one video presentation (instead of 2). Still weighs 20%

### **History**

Paper 2 amended - Students answer one question (instead of 2). Still weighs 45% (at SL, 25% at HL)

Paper 3 (HL) amended - Students answer two questions (instead of 3). Still weighs 35%

### **ITGS**

Paper 2 removed - Used to weigh 30% (at SL, 20% at HL)

### **Psychology**

Paper 2 (SL) removed - Used to weigh 25%

Paper 2 (HL) amended - Students only answer 1 questions (instead of 2). Still weighs 25%

Paper 3 (HL) removed - Used to weigh 20%

### **Philosophy**

Paper 2 amended - Section B (optional topics) removed. Still weighs 25% (at SL, 20% at HL)

### **Social & Cultural Anthropology**

Paper 1 (SL) amended - Question 5 (Understanding of a “big” anthropological question) removed. Still weighs 40% (at SL, 30% at HL)

Paper 2 amended - Section B removed (9 areas of inquiry, each with two questions, of which students answer a single question) removed. Still weighs 45% (at HL, 40% at SL)

### **World Religions**

Paper 1 (SL) amended - “students answer one question from each of the three sections” (instead of “Nine stimulus response questions, one on each of the nine world religions. The paper is divided into three sections (A, B and C) based on the columns of religions. Students should answer five, at least one from each section.” Still weighs 30%.

Paper 2 (SL) amended - students answer one question from either section (instead of 1 question from each). Still weighs 40%.

### **Group 4**

#### **Biology**

Paper 3 removed - Optional Topic and Data on Experimentation Questions

Group 4 Project - Never part of final grade

#### **Chemistry**

Paper 3 removed - Optional Topic and Data on Experimentation Questions

Group 4 Project - Never part of final grade

#### **Physics**

Paper 3 removed - Optional Topic and Data on Experimentation Questions



## **Group 4 Project - Never part of final grade**

### **ESS**

Unchanged

### **DT**

Paper 1 removed - Core material previously weighing 30% (at SL, 20% at HL) of final grade. Presumably has been ripped out on account of being multiple choice..?  
Group 4 Project - Never part of final grade

### **Computer Science**

Paper 2 - Option Paper, previously weighing 25% (at SL, 20% at HL) of final grade.  
Group 4 Project - Never part of final grade

### **SEHS**

Paper 3 - Option Paper, previously weighing 20%.  
Group 4 Project - Never part of final grade

## **Group 5**

### **Maths: Analysis & Approaches**

Unchanged

### **Maths: Applications & Interpretations**

Unchanged

## **Group 6**

### **Dance**

Composition & Analysis removed - Core material previously weigh 40% (at SL, 35% at HL). Presumably been removed to ease external moderation demands?

### **Film**

Film portfolio amended - Core Material in which students submit evidence for only one role (instead of 3), still weighs 25% (at SL, 40% at HL)  
Collaborative film project removed - Core Material which previously weighed 35% (HL only)

### **Theatre**

Collaborative Project removed - Core material previously weighing 35% (at SL, 25% at HL)

### **Visual Arts**

Art-making Forms Requirements removed - still weighs 40%  
Exhibition amended - students submit fewer works (4-6 at SL, 7-10 at HL), still weighs 40%

### **Music**

Paper 1 removed - Core material, previously weighing 30%  
Creating or performing (SL) amended - Core material from which students must choose one of Creating, Solo Performance or Group Performance, weighs 50%. Amended as follows:  
    Creating (SLC)—amended; students submit only one piece  
    Solo performing (SLS)—amended; students submit 10 minutes  
    Group performing (SLG)—amended; students submit 13–20 minutes  
Creating or performing (HL) - Creating amended - students provide 2 pieces of work (instead of 3), still weighed at 25%  
Creating or performing (HL) - Solo performing amended - students' pieces are now 13 mins (instead of 20 mins), still weighs 20%



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