



EIM Focus Groups

Highlights

16 June 2025

1. Executive summary

As part of the current consultancy project for Education Index Management Asia Pacific (EIM), 5 focus groups have taken place so far with current university students, university graduates, agents, school counsellors and university staff. The focus groups are being complemented by additional one-to-one interviews when individuals were not available to attend the proposed focus group. As individual interviews continue to take place over the next couple of weeks, this report presents the highlights so far and a detailed written report will follow soon with the findings of all the focus groups and individual interviews.

A total of 23 individuals have participated in the focus groups and individual interviews so far (5 university students, 7 graduates, 3 school counsellors, 3 agents and 5 university representatives). At least 8 more individual interviews are scheduled with school counsellors, agents and university representatives. Participants are either studying, have graduated from or are currently working in the UK, US, Canada, Spain, France, Netherlands, Turkey, Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia and India. They have shared their experiences and insights within higher education, including at universities in the global top #20 such as University of Cambridge, University of Oxford, King's College London and Delft University of Technology.

2. Highlights from the focus groups so far

Current university students and graduates

- They recognise that achieving great academic results is the first step towards leading universities worldwide.
- Those who completed the IB considered themselves better prepared for university and employment, as their school focused on making them “well-rounded individuals” and the IB included subjects such as CAS with work and volunteering activities.
- Those who completed A Levels had undertaken additional supra curricular and extra curricular activities, often encouraged by their school and university advisors to do so.
- There was a clear difference between students geared towards more academically-orientated admission university systems such as the UK, and the US. Students and graduates at US universities reflected on the importance of non-academic activities they completed and how they helped them to focus more on finding their passion and strengths even during the first year of university.
- There was a general consensus about the relevance and need of including digital skills and AI within the school curriculum. Regarding AI, they highlighted the need to teach

students how to use relevant tools and to raise their awareness of how AI impacts everyday life.

- There were mixed opinions regarding the relevance and applicability of work-experience and employability-related activities within the school curriculum. Their feedback varied considerably depending on the type of school they attended. Talks with professionals to explain what a particular profession entails were well received, as well as some exposure to “real-life” work experiences even if it was for a short period of time and in a non-related field (some of them mentioned their experience working in retail and hospitality as eye-opening and key to increase their awareness of working life). However most of them also reflected on the pressure that students feel under to choose a career path too early on.
- Some explained how, during sixth form, they felt they had to do additional activities just to have something to differentiate themselves from other applicants and to include it within their university application. This wasn't the case for IB students though.

Agents

- They reflected on a clear difference between the US and other university systems more academically-driven in their admission processes.
- Most participants believe that secondary school graduates lack the critical thinking skills and maturity required for work.
- They emphasized the importance of soft skills such as negotiation, team building and communication, for students' future success in both entrepreneurial and corporate settings.
- They agreed that exposing secondary school students to work environments early on helps them to decide on their professional path and consequently their university choice.
- When talking about university admission processes, they mentioned that personal statements are likely to be less relevant due to the risk of them being AI-generated, and how universities look not just for good academic grades but also “well-rounded” students.
- In general they were positive about the new curriculum proposition.

School counsellors

- They explained how university admissions processes and requirements have a big weight on the school curriculum but reminded us that the role of school is to prepare students for life, not just for university admissions.

- They recognised the importance of embedding employability skills within the curriculum but also recognised that students are sometimes under too much pressure to identify their career path too early. In their opinion, it is important to ensure any work-related opportunity is “relevant” and they mentioned how a “real job” experience develops basic employability skills such as punctuality, commitment, responsibility and communication abilities.
- They also talked about the importance of students learning about diverse career paths and understanding that professional journeys are often non-linear.
- They reflected and listed many of the supra curriculum and extra curricular activities offered by their schools; including volunteering opportunities and those included within CAS in IB schools.
- There was a difference between the counsellors representing IB schools and those representing A levels in their opinion regarding how prepared their students are for worklife. IB school counsellors emphasised all the soft skills their students acquired, only lacking the technical skills they get at university. A level school counsellors said not all their students are ready for employment and many lack leadership and social skills.
- They explained how they guide students depending on the country and type of university they are interested in from early years and how the current US events are encouraging parents and students to change their mind regarding their chosen destination.
- The experience embedding digital and AI skills within their school varied, but they all agreed there is a need to focus more on those.
- In general they were positive about the pillars of the new curriculum however they warned that in order for it to be embedded within their schools, it would need to be recognised by universities worldwide. School counsellors mentioned the need for staff training and resources to roll out any new curriculum, and considered the possibility of offering it alongside another one or offering parts of it as complement to their main school curriculum.

University staff

- They all explained how it is complex to differentiate between applicants with similar academic grades and how in their admissions process they look at different inputs such as the personal statement, entry tests when relevant, interviews when they are a standard part of the admissions process, and reference letters.
- Leading universities (Cambridge) said they discouraged applicants from taking additional A levels to avoid them losing focus and to try to concentrate the student’s efforts in achieving the best possible grades and excellence in their chosen subject. On the contrary, other universities admitted they would consider an additional A level as a way of prioritising an applicant over another.

- They highlighted the need for more practical, hands-on learning to develop relevant skills, while also noting that students' social skills and digital competencies vary. They focused as well on the importance of practical education and the need to balance theoretical and practical approaches to better prepare students for the workplace.
- Their opinion is that in general both IB and A level applicants from international schools are well prepared for university, although there are some regional differences, and sometimes students may find negative feedback or failure challenging due to their overachieving nature and lack of emotional maturity. One participant said that A-level students tend to demonstrate strong subject mastery, whilst IB students offer broader adaptability.
- Most participants in the focus group agreed on the relevance of teaching digital skills and AI to students, mainly with regards to the use of specific tools and awareness of their impact on everyday and academic life. They recognised that sometimes students have better digital skills than university staff and that they need clear guidance on the use of AI tools.
- They warned against over stretching students and the importance of being mindful of their mental health.
- Regarding the possible acceptance of the new curriculum, they recognised some universities may be skeptical initially and required external benchmarking and other universities accepting it.