

The education system of

Singapore

described and compared with
the Dutch system

This document contains information on the education system of Singapore. We explain the Dutch equivalent of the most common qualifications from Singapore for the purpose of admission to Dutch higher education.

Disclaimer

We assemble the information for these descriptions of education systems with the greatest care. However, we cannot be held responsible for the consequences of errors or incomplete information in this document.

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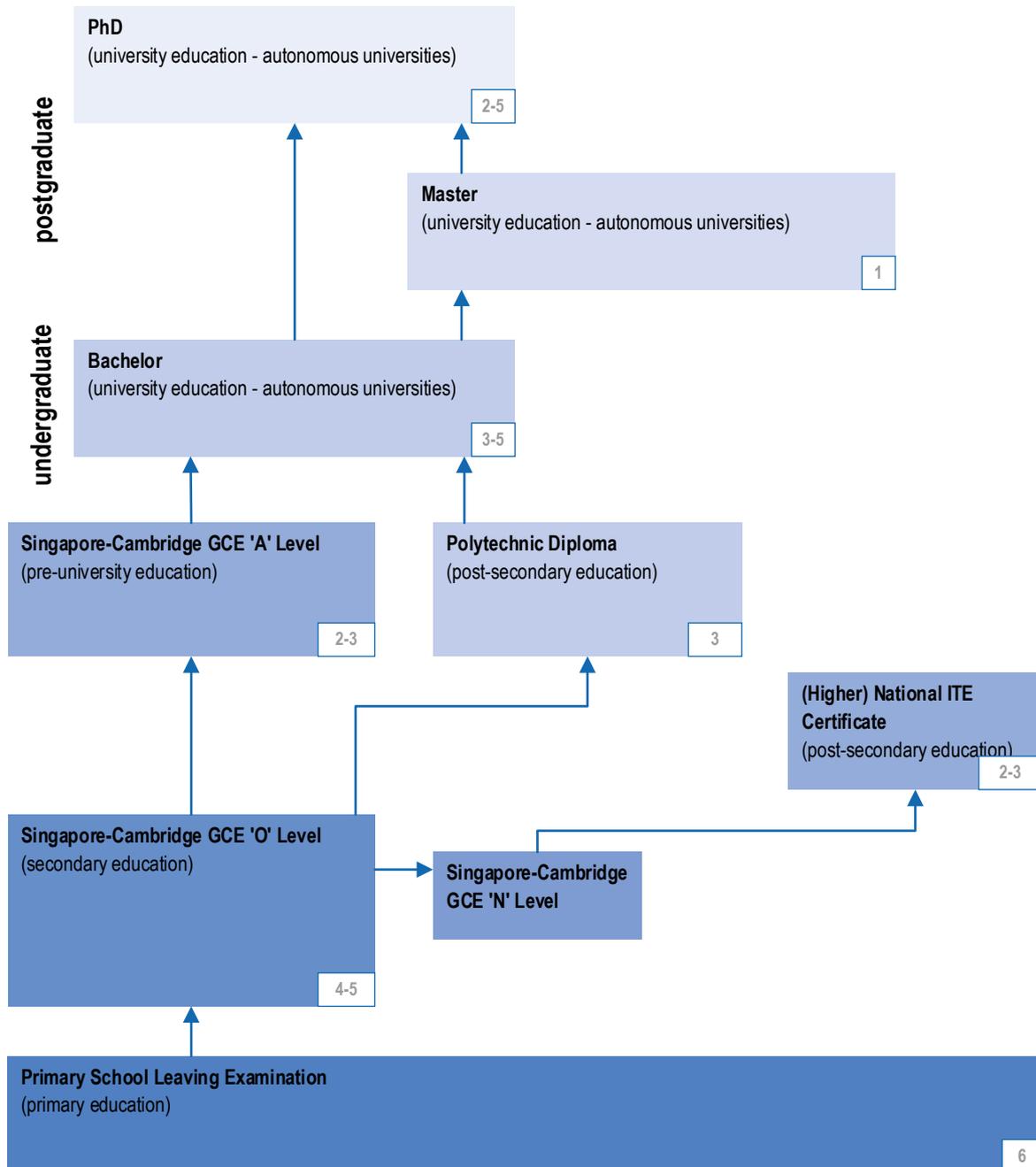


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■ Background

- **Country:** Singapore, officially the Republic of Singapore.
- **History:** After a long period as a British colony, Singapore briefly formed a political union with Malaysia before becoming an independent republic in 1965.
- **Responsible for education:** The [Ministry of Education](#) (MOE).
- **Compulsory education:** from 6 to 15 years.
- **Language of instruction:** English.
- **School year:** From January to December (at polytechnics from April to March)
- **School exams:** MOE/SEAB publishes the [timetable for the national examinations](#); the exam results of 'O' levels are announced mid-January, and the results of the 'A' levels follow in March.
- **Academic year:** Depending on the autonomous university, it consists of 2 semesters (usually August-May), plus (optional) special terms (May-July), or 3 trimesters.

■ Flow chart: education system Singapore



0 Duration of education

Evaluation chart

The left-hand column in the table below lists the foreign qualifications. The other columns show the Dutch equivalent along with the comparable levels in the Dutch and European qualifications frameworks.

Foreign degree or qualification	Dutch equivalent and NLQF level	EQF level	EQF level
<i>Singapore-Cambridge GCE 'O' level (6 different content-based subjects with grades from A-C)</i>	at least a VMBO-T diploma	2	2
<i>Singapore-Cambridge GCE 'A' level in 2 H2 content-based subjects + Singapore-Cambridge GCE 'O' level in 4 subjects (grades from A-C) (6 different subjects in total)</i>	HAVO diploma	4	4
<i>Singapore-Cambridge GCE 'A' level in 3 H2 + 1 H1 content-based subjects + General Paper/ Knowledge and Inquiry (5 different subjects in total)</i>	VWO diploma	4+	4
<i>Polytechnic Diploma (3-year full-time programme)</i>	1 year of HBO	6	6
<i>Honours Bachelor (autonomous university)</i>	HBO or WO bachelor's degree	6	6
<i>Master (autonomous university)</i>	HBO or WO master's degree	7	7

NB

- The information provided in the table is a general recommendation from which no rights may be derived.
- NLQF = Dutch Qualifications Framework. [EQF](#) = European Qualifications Framework.
- The [EQF/NLQF level](#) is not so much a reflection of study load or content; rather, it is an indication of a person's knowledge and skills after having completed a certain programme of study.
- Information about Dutch equivalent qualifications can be found on our website: [education and diplomas the Netherlands](#).
- [The Cooperation Organisation for Vocational Education, Training and the Labour Market](#) (SBB), evaluates statements on foreign qualifications and training at VMBO and MBO level. The evaluation may vary if SBB evaluates the diploma for admission to VET schools or the labour market in the Netherlands.

■ Primary and secondary education

Primary education

In Singapore primary education lasts 6 years. It is compulsory and free, and is intended for children aged 6-12. The curriculum emphasis lies on the English language, Mother Tongue Language (or MTL: Chinese, Malaysian or Tamil) and arithmetic. There is a national final exam: the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). The results of this exam are used for admission to secondary school.

Secondary education

Secondary education lasts 4 or 5 years, depending on the chosen pathway. The Express pathway takes 4 years, and concludes with the national final exam. On average, students take exams in 7 to 8 subjects and receive the *Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level (Singapore-Cambridge GCE 'O' Level)*. Exam results are announced in mid-January.

In terms of level, the *Singapore-Cambridge GCE 'O' Level* in 6 different [content-based subjects](#) with grades A-C is comparable to at least a VMBO-T diploma.

In addition to the Express pathway, students can also choose the Normal pathway which offers the Normal (Academic) and Normal (Technical) options. Both pathways take 5 years. The 4th year concludes with the GCE 'N' Level (Normal Level) exam. Students who take the general Normal (Academic) curriculum take exams in 5 to 8 subjects. In the vocational Normal (Technical) curriculum, students choose 5 to 7 subjects. It is not until the end of the 5th year that students take the Singapore-Cambridge GCE 'O' Level exam.

Post-secondary education

Education completed after the Singapore-Cambridge GCE 'O' Level falls under post-secondary education. This includes education at a range of levels, such as pre-university, polytechnic and senior secondary vocational education.

Pre-university: GCE 'A' Level

In Dutch terms, pre-university education is equivalent to senior general secondary education. This type of education leads to the Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (GCE 'A' Level). It takes 2 years at a junior college, or 3 years at a centralised institute (of which the Millennia Institute is the only one now remaining).

GCE 'A' Level curriculum

Within the current [GCE 'A' Level curriculum](#), students can choose:

- content-based subjects; and
- knowledge skills subjects.

The **content-based subjects** belong to 1 of these 3 disciplines:

- Languages;
- Humanities and the Arts;
- Mathematics and Sciences.

The **knowledge skills subjects** are not related to 1 discipline. The goal is for students to develop certain skills:

- [General Paper](#) (GP);
- Knowledge and Inquiry (KI);
- Project Work (PW);
- Co-Curricular Activities (CCA).

Note: These subjects can contribute to admission to higher education, but cannot replace the content-based subjects.

Levels H1-H3

There are 3 levels within the GCE 'A' Level curriculum:

- Higher 1 (H1), which includes all Language subjects with the exception of Mother Tongue B, which has no associated level. The H1 study load is equal to half of H2;
- Higher 2 (H2), which includes virtually all subjects from Humanities and the Arts, and Mathematics and Sciences;
- Higher 3 (H3), which may only be taken in combination with a corresponding subject at H2-level.

Note: H3 subjects are optional, and give students the opportunity to study a subject in greater depth.

GCE 'A' Level exam

In their final year, students take the national exam. In general, students complete exams in 4 different content-based subjects: 3 H2 subjects and 1 H1 subject. Of these 4 subjects, 1 must be a 'contrasting subject', or a subject that does not belong to the same discipline (e.g. a sciences subject as a contrast to 3 humanities subjects). At the same time, students also complete exams for the subjects GP, PW or KI, and possibly also CCA.

In terms of level, the *Singapore-Cambridge GCE 'A' Level* in 3 H2 + 1 H1 content-based subjects + General Paper/Knowledge and Inquiry (5 different subjects in total) is comparable to a VWO diploma.

In terms of level, the *Singapore-Cambridge GCE 'A' Level* in 2 H2 content-based subjects + the *Singapore-Cambridge GCE 'O' Level* in 4 subjects with grades A-C (6 different subjects in total) is comparable to a HAVO diploma.

Note: For admission to a Dutch HBO bachelor's programme, higher education institutions may consider other combinations.

Integrated Programme (IP)

In 2004, the Integrated Programme (IP) was introduced: an alternative pathway to the GCE 'A' Level examination. The IP pathway takes 6 years, and gives students the opportunity to move on to a junior college without taking the GCE 'O' Level exam. Instead of the *Singapore-Cambridge GCE 'A' Level*, in some cases the IP pathway leads to a different certificate (e.g. *NUS High School Diploma*, *International Baccalaureate*).

Polytechnic

There are currently 5 polytechnics in Singapore. Together they offer a wide range of programmes. The 3-year full-time programmes conclude with the Polytechnic Diploma, an exit qualification which prepares students for the labour market. Additionally, students with a Polytechnic Diploma can continue with a bachelor's programme at a public university in Singapore, provided they satisfy a number of additional requirements. Depending on the chosen specialisation, students can start in either the first year of a bachelor's programme, or the second year of a bachelor's in a related discipline.

In terms of level, the *Polytechnic Diploma* is comparable to 1 year of higher professional education (HBO).

Besides the *Polytechnic Diploma* programme, polytechnics offer other programmes too. For example, programmes for qualifications such as the (*Advanced*) *Diploma* and *Specialist Diploma*.

Senior secondary vocational education

In the regular education system, senior secondary vocational education is provided by the Institute of Technical Education (ITE). There are 2- and 3-year *National ITE Certificate* (NITEC) programmes, and 2-year *Higher NITEC* programmes. Both the *GCE 'N' Level* and the *GCE 'O' Level* give access to these programmes.

■ Higher education

The higher education system is unitary. This means that there is no distinction between university and higher professional education, such as in the Netherlands. Students can follow higher education at autonomous universities (public institutions), see [Overview of higher education institutions](#).

■ Admission to higher education

Admission to bachelor programmes at state-run (autonomous) universities requires the *Singapore-Cambridge GCE 'A' Level*. In addition, students must meet the following conditions:

- 3 content-based subjects at H2 level; and
- 1 content-based subject at H1 level; and
- the [GP](#) (or KI) and PW, completed in the same examination year as the 3 H2 subjects; and
- [Mother Tongue Language](#) (MTL): this may be the H1 subject or an 'O' Level subject for which at least a B has been obtained.

■ University and higher professional education

Universities offer both academic and higher professional education. In Singapore, students can achieve these degrees at one of the 6 [autonomous universities](#):

- Bachelor
- Master
- PhD

Bachelor

Bachelor's programmes generally take 3-4 years, except for medicine (which takes 5 years). Institutions often only offer a bachelor's degree as a regular (pass) bachelor's degree or as an honours degree. Sometimes a student can choose to follow a programme as a pass bachelor or as an honours degree.

The distinction between a pass or honours bachelor differs per university. For example, the honours bachelor lasts 4 years at the National University of Singapore (NUS), while the bachelor is offered as a 3-year programme.

In terms of level, the *Honours Bachelor* obtained from an autonomous university is comparable to an HBO or WO bachelor's degree, depending on the discipline and type of study programme.

Master

Master's programmes are available as taught/coursework programmes and research programmes. Admission to a research master's requires an honours bachelor in a related discipline. A taught master's requires a pass (ordinary) bachelor. Programmes may also set additional requirements, such as an admission test (an external test, such as [GMAT or GRE](#), or one set by the faculty itself), an interview, or specific subject knowledge.

Full-time master's programmes are of 1-year duration, and must generally be completed within 2-3 years. The curriculum of the taught/coursework master's consists mainly of lectures and tutorials; a concluding final project or thesis is optional. In addition to the classes, the curriculum of a research master's also includes a final thesis.

In terms of level, the *Master* obtained from an autonomous university is comparable to an HBO or WO master's degree, depending on the discipline and type of study programme.

In addition to master's programmes, some faculties also offer short, postgraduate programmes made up only of classes. These programmes confer the *(Post)Graduate Diploma*.

PhD

The admission requirements and nominal programme length of PhD programmes vary between universities and programmes. In general, an honours bachelor or a bachelor with high marks will grant access to a PhD programme.

There are often additional requirements, such as high marks on an external exam (such as GMAT or GRE), or the faculty entrance exam. The faculty can also set relevant work or research experience as an additional requirement.

The minimum programme length can range from 2 to 5 years, depending on the study programme. PhD programmes generally consist of 2 stages:

- 1st phase: attending classes;
- PhD qualifying examinations;
- 2nd phase: the dissertation.

Before candidates are allowed to proceed to the 2nd phase, they often have to take PhD qualifying examinations. They must also submit a research proposal for their dissertation and defend it verbally. There may also be additional requirements, such as a certain grade average.

■ Assessment systems

Secondary education

In Singapore, marks are expressed as letters from A-E, where A is the highest score and E is barely satisfactory. Results of S (sub-pass, or unsatisfactory) and Ungraded are not listed on the final certificate.

Additionally, a separate system is used for H3 subjects in the GCE 'A' Levels, which can only be obtained with results of Distinction, Merit, Pass or Ungraded.

Polytechnic

The polytechnics use letter grades in combination with the GPA (Grade Point Average) system. It can differ per polytechnic how many points they link to an assessment (represented by a letter).

Universities

The public universities also use a letter system in combination with the GPA system (4 or 5-point system). The 5-point GPA system by NTU is also used by the NUS.

Letter Grade	Grade Point
A+	5.0
A	5.0
A-	4.5
B+	4.0
B	3.5
B-	3.0
C+	2.5
C	2
D+	1.5
D	1.0
E	0.5
F	0.0

Source: [Examination – NTU, Singapore](#)

■ Qualification frameworks

Singapore has not established a national qualifications framework. The Singapore Department of Statistics has developed the [Singapore Standard Educational Classification](#) (SSEC) for statistical purposes, however. The SSEC distinguishes between various educational levels according to education type (such as primary, secondary and post-secondary), but does not set or describe any learning outcomes for these levels.

■ Accreditation and quality assurance

Post-secondary or higher education in Singapore has no government-recognised accreditation system. Public institutions (autonomous universities and polytechnics) are founded according to legislation. There are 2 exceptions: the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) and Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS – formerly known as SIM University). Both were initially private institutions, but SIT became an autonomous university in March 2014, and SUSS in August 2017. Since then, these institutions are allowed to issue their own degrees.

Private education

Private-sector institutions may provide education at all levels, and offer their own certificates and diplomas as final qualifications. These certificates are not nationally recognised diplomas.

All private education institutions (PEIs) must be registered with the [Committee for Private Education](#) (CPE). This obligation also applies to foreign institutions with a campus in Singapore. However, registration with CPE is **not** equivalent to recognition or accreditation. The CPE does not guarantee the quality of the education programmes.

Degrees of private institutions

Private education institutions (PEIs) may not confer their own degrees, such as a Bachelor or Master. They can, however, offer external degree programmes. In this construction, the private Singaporean institution provides the teaching and the foreign partner institution confers the degree. Diplomas thus granted fall under the accreditation and certification system in the country of the relevant international partner.

■ Checking documents

Secondary education

The official *Singapore-Cambridge GCE 'A' Level Certificate*, plus the *Singapore-Cambridge GCE 'O' Level Certificate*.

Certificate-holders who lose their originals may request a replacement Statement of Results from the SEAB. Since 2008, the Ministry of Education has also offered the School Graduation Certificate to students who have obtained their *Singapore-Cambridge GCE 'A' Level*. This document also contains information on the exam results obtained for the *Singapore-Cambridge GCE 'O' Level*.

Polytechnic and higher education

The Diploma or degree, and statement of results.

Authenticity and verification

Verification via the registrar is only possible with written proof of the student's permission. Some education institutions also offer online verification via a database. The graduate's passport number is often required (for foreign students) or a national NRIC/FIN identification number (for local students). In some cases, additional information is required that may be found on the reverse side of the diploma, or at the top/bottom of the statement of results.

Credential evaluation

Nuffic evaluates qualifications according to the principles of the [Lisbon Recognition Convention](#) (1997). A practical implementation of these standards can be found in the European [EAR manual](#).

■ Overview of higher education institutions

Autonomous universities (AU)

1. [National University of Singapore](#) (NUS)
2. [Nanyang Technological University](#) (NTU)
3. [Singapore Management University](#) (SMU)
4. [Singapore University of Technology and Design](#) (SUTD)
5. [Singapore Institute of Technology](#) (SIT), previously a private institution. SIT became an autonomous university in 2014.
6. [Singapore University of Social Sciences](#) (SUSS), formerly known as SIM University (UniSIM), a private university. SUSS is an autonomous university since August 2017.

Useful links

- The [Ministry of Education](#) (MOE), including information on public post-secondary education institutions, e.g. an [overview of the polytechnics](#).
- The [Singapore Examinations and Assessment Board](#) (SEAB) is the government body that creates the national final examinations for primary and secondary education. Graduates who lose their final diploma can request a Statement of Results from the SEAB.
- The [National Institute of Education](#) (NIE), containing information on teacher-training programmes.
- [SkillsFuture Singapore](#) (SGG), a statutory board under the Ministry of Education (MOE), including a [database](#) with registered 'Private Education Institutions, PEIs'. This registration is **not** equivalent to recognition or accreditation.
- The [Institute of Technical Education](#) (ITE), with information on programmes and partners.

Glossary

- **Content-based subjects:** content-related subjects, such as languages, history and mathematics, whereby students gain knowledge about 1 subject.
- **Duration:** the official length of the full-time programme (not part-time) without study delay.
- **GMAT:** Graduate Management Admission Test. A standardised test measuring elementary verbal, mathematical and analytical skills.
- **GP:** [General Paper](#), see also *skill-based subjects*.
- **Graduate programme:** a programme leading to an advanced academic degree (i.e. master's or PhD degree). See also the description in the Nuffic Glossary: [graduate](#).
- **GRE:** Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) is a test that is used as an admission requirement for students who want to follow a master's degree. The GRE is based on 3 elements: Verbal Reasoning, Quantitative Reasoning and Analytical Writing.
- **Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC):** the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European Region, was drafted in 1997 by the Council of Europe and Unesco to facilitate and promote fair recognition among Parties of the Convention. Read more on the [website of the Council of Europe](#).
- **MTL:** Mother Tongue Language. Chinese, Malaysian or Tamil.
- **Skill-based subjects:** subjects such as [General Paper](#) and Knowledge and Inquiry, in which students learn certain skills (for example, analysing texts).
- **Undergraduate programme:** a programme for a bachelor's degree. See also the description in the Nuffic Glossary: [undergraduate](#).