

Introduction

ColegauCymru welcomes the opportunity to respond to the National Assembly for Wales' Children, Young People and Education Committee's Inquiry into the Status of the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification. ColegauCymru represents the 13¹ further education (FE) colleges and FE institutions in Wales² and exists to promote the public benefit of post compulsory education and learning.

Response

1. ColegauCymru is supportive of the baccalaureate approach to study with its emphasis on encouraging learners to be more responsible for their own learning, developing their own projects and interests, while drawing on teaching and learning staff more in their capacity as supervisors or mentors than sources of facts. However, in practice, the baccalaureate approach has sometimes become separated from the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification.
2. In drawing together the response to this inquiry, several colleges noted that they had already provided evidence to the Qualifications Wales Review of the design and assessment model of the Skills Challenge Certificate and its place within the Welsh Baccalaureate, published in April 2018.
3. For the purpose of this enquiry, ColegauCymru would ask that the difference between the importance of encompassing holistic learning and the methods of specific model of assessing learning outcomes is not lost.

The extent to which the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification is understood and valued by learners, parents, education professionals in schools and colleges, higher education institutions and employers.

4. The ongoing and long-lasting debate over the value of the WBQ suggests that it is not well understood across the range of interest groups. Naturally, it takes a certain period of time for change to become established and understood and Qualifications Wales are working to promote understanding of WBQ. There is a need to raise awareness of the baccalaureate approach, which is related to, but not synonymous with, the WBQ.
5. Most learners who come directly from schools in Wales have a detailed understanding of the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification (WBQ). Some learners and parents value this qualification and recognise the potential it has to enrich the curriculum and provide learners with wider skills. To a great extent, the attitude of the learner depends on their previous experience with WBQ, and this has not always been positive. A significant minority of learners

who have undertaken the WBQ previously have had negative experiences of delivery of this qualification and have negative perceptions about it. Many learners also feel that the qualification is repetitive in its structure. A number of learners and their parents would prefer the option to undertake an additional A Level rather than the WBQ.

6. Many parents do not understand the WBQ and so do not value the qualification. This is slowly changing but more work needs to be done to raise the profile of the qualification. Some colleges reported that when meeting parents, the value of WBQ is not initially recognised. However, when staff set the qualification in the context of higher education and employment, parents generally develop a more positive view. This means that WBQ requires specific promotion from college staff. To this end, we note that Qualifications Wales maintains a role for the promotion of its regulated qualifications and that this role includes promotion of the WBQ. Specific enquires should be made by the committee of the remit of this role and the main findings that have emerged.
7. Education professionals at some colleges noted that they value the breadth of the Advanced WBQ and the opportunities it affords learners to develop understanding and skills and wider experience of citizenship, alongside academic study. The extended project introduces learners to valuable higher- level research skills supporting their transition into higher education. Colleges reported that many learners use the extended project to support their personal statements and application to universities.
8. It should be noted that according to our enquiries, the national and foundation level post 16 WBQ are increasingly not delivered by further education colleges due to the heavy burden of assessment and workload for achievement of this qualification in one year. Otherwise, this takes place in addition to delivering the main vocational qualifications with controlled assessments, in many cases resit GCSEs, or the wider development of remedial as well as applied essential skills. ColegauCymru believes as a matter of policy as well as of practice FEIs should be allowed and encouraged to determine the best curriculum offer for learners.
9. Some colleges report finding that learners entering college have a negative view of the qualification and have received feedback that learners are choosing providers where they do not have to study the WBQ. Colleges who have campuses near the border with England have anecdotal evidence of learners who have chosen to study elsewhere, including in England, as they do not want to study WBQ. This feedback comes from some parents too. These colleges argue that WBQ has affected their learner recruitment. In the absence of identifiable research, ColegauCymru would suggest that

this is a topic the committee pursue in more detail.

10. It appears that employers have a patchy understanding of the WBQ at best and do not really appreciate that the qualification is aimed at improving the learners' skills to make them more employable. Network Rail, Sports Wales, National Museum have been supportive but more successful case studies are required to showcase the added value the WBQ can bring in terms of employability skills.
11. Based on the feedback we have received, the WBQ appears to have an uncertain status across the higher education sector with no consistency of understanding. It is becoming more accepted in universities which is positive for a number of learners. The understanding and value of the WBQ is growing in the higher education sector. However, more work needs to be done to raise its profile. Cardiff and Bristol both Russell Group Universities, for example, are now publicly accepting of the WBQ. It would be helpful if more case studies existed as examples of where the WBQ has helped to secure university placements. It is important to note that the inclusion of the WBQ on the UCAS application system does not necessarily mean that it is welcomed by prospective institutions.
12. Other colleges reported confusion among learners and parents regarding the difference between the Skills Challenge Certificate and the Advanced WBQ, as well as with the grading structure: and how the use of Distinction, Merit and Pass for the Challenges converts into an A*-E grade.
13. There is a general view that publicity and public awareness needs to be increased.

The extent to which the Welsh Baccalaureate is considered by learners, education professionals in schools and colleges, employers and higher education to be an equivalent, rigorous qualification.

14. There was no clear agreement about the extent to which WBQ was generally accepted as being a rigorous qualification. Its value can be undermined by negative perceptions of different groups but some colleges felt that it was not seen as rigorous or the equivalent to a mainstream qualification and often still felt like a 'bolt on'. A key issue is finding ways to use the qualification to enhance core vocational studies as opposed to feeling like repetition of work achieved elsewhere
15. In some colleges, WBQ is delivered as a compulsory qualification for all Level 3 learners and has the same value placed on it as an A level or vocational main qualification. Certain colleges emphasised their regular professional training sessions for teaching staff and the hard work they had put in to ensure that WBQ is valued by all.
16. Building on the response to the previous question, HEIs have a highly variable response and understanding of the rigour of the Advanced WBQ,

particularly now that this qualification is graded. Some universities see the positive benefits of the qualification and accept it as an A Level equivalent. Other universities have different approaches with colleges reporting variability between departments and admissions tutors, including the WBQ being given UCAS points matching the English extended essay (even though this is a far smaller qualification) or not being accepted at all. The extent to which these practices are based on the perception of its rigour should be explored in more depth particular with the awarding body.

The status of the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification in schools and colleges, including the Welsh Government's target for universal adoption and the potential impact of this approach.

17. Learning needs to be tailored to the needs of the learner and a compulsory approach risks contradicting much of the baccalaureate principle. The tendency is currently to move away from universal adoption and to offer routes that do not necessarily include the WBQ; many colleges are choosing to reduce their delivery of the WBQ. This is partly due to the issues that have been identified through the review of the qualification by Qualifications Wales, resulting in the WBQ not being fit for purpose for the many FE learners. As there is a lot of negativity associated with the WBQ by school leavers who often do not want to study this qualification, this has to be countered and must not continue to be a barrier to further academic or vocational study.
18. There is great deal of concern about universal adoption and whether both the functioning of the qualification and its delivery by the sector is sufficiently robust. Until more of the problems identified have been resolved, universal adoption does not seem a sensible approach. Universal adoption of Level 3 could potentially work but there are more concerns about Foundation and National levels. Advanced WBQ is over two years and is a useful qualification to support progression into employment and higher-level study. It is currently felt to particularly complement A Level programmes and enriches the curriculum for these learners.
19. Universal adoption is not practical for all FE learners in college as the National and Foundation WBQs are not practical to be delivered for these one-year programmes. Learners on Level 1 and 2 courses undertaking these qualifications invariably also have to undertake resit English and Maths GCSE qualifications in this year. These assessments, in conjunction with more vocational qualifications with strict controlled assessments, means that the WBQ at these levels is, in effect, undeliverable. One college suggested potentially removing the requirement for GCSE Maths, English/Welsh at Level 1 and 2: initial pilots of the Post 16 Foundation and National WBQ allowed for contextualised literacy and numeracy development within the vocational areas.

20. When some colleges trialled the qualifications in 2015/16, there was a significant dip in retention. Some learners left due to the heavy workload and stress caused and from disengagement as they wanted to do a practical vocational course. There is a need to take account of the best interests of learners, including what learners want to study and what will best engage them.
21. In order to gain the WBQ Advanced qualification, at the end of two years of study, learners must have achieved their main qualification and Maths, English/Welsh GCSE (at C or above) and the Skills Challenge certificate. For many learners, this is too great a challenge. The WBQ is a valuable programme of study, but it is not suitable for all learners to pursue. Some colleges report having had learners state that they will leave rather than undertake the WBQ alongside their main qualifications.

The wider impact of studying the Welsh Baccalaureate on other curriculum subjects and education provision.

22. As a general consideration, the WBQ and evaluations of it have focused narrowly on A Levels. Given the nature of the delivery of learning via the Learning Programmes, greater consideration needs to be given to how WBQ fits with vocational learners and courses and making it relevant to these learners. One college did, however, highlight good practice examples of lecturers integrating the four skills challenges into the main vocational qualification.
23. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many learners are focusing on two A Levels and the WBQ rather than three A Levels which can have an impact on higher level study. The WBQ has resulted in a higher proportion of A Level learners choosing to study fewer AS subjects (or withdrawing from AS subjects) so that they can manage the additional workload of the WBQ qualification.
24. The issue of whether there is scope for the Skills Challenges to be accredited more individually was raised. Some learners who study a 90 credit Diploma in Year 1, complete two of the Skills Challenges but then decide to go into Employment/Apprenticeship. Similarly, some AS students decide to change to Vocational programmes or enter WBL having completed two of the Skills Challenges in the AS year.
25. Some colleges suggested that the WJEC Extended Project Qualification could be considered as a stand-alone option for high GCSE achievers who would prefer to study four AS subjects.
26. Many students and tutors (from other curriculum subjects) see the time

allocated to the WBQ, as time that could be spent on the main qualification. There needs to be a clear focus on, and understanding of, how the WBQ can improve the learners' skills and enhance their ability to progress. The size of the qualification can mean tutors have to use main qualification time for delivery which is not helpful. Some colleges suggested that WBQ needs a specialist team and asked if there should be a qualification for WBQ tutors, making them specialists in the facilitation the qualification requires.

27. Whilst the WBQ can be an enriching qualification for many learners, many colleges believe that it is not suitable for all learners and all education provision. For vocational subjects where there is a heavy reliance on practical skills for employment, the WBQ seems less relevant. These include curriculum areas that link heavily to work-based learning pathways and apprenticeships (i.e. construction, motor vehicle, hair and beauty, catering). Learners in these areas work to achieve technical competency in a skills and employment focused curriculum. The WBQ can disengage learners (many of whom have not been successful in schools and in academic learning previously). These areas also attract adult learners and this makes it very challenging to deliver an integrated curriculum as the WBQ is not suitable for adult learners wanting technical skills development. The impact of this may well be further disengagement of these learners from education, which brings wider impacts.

The benefits and disadvantages of the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification to learners, schools and colleges, higher education institutions and employers.

28. At its best, over two years, the Advanced WBQ further enriches the A Level and Level 3 vocational curriculum and prepares learners well for the academic expectations of an academically-researched, extended writing project at university; and application to university and interviews for employment. If taught and structured correctly, the WBQ could support the learners with their skills to ensure purposeful progression.

29. Other benefits include the UCAS points attached to the Skills Challenge certificate, that the WBQ can provide evidence for personal statements, and in theory, should lead to well-rounded individuals who are more work-ready and able to meet the needs of employers. Some colleges recognised the WBQ offered the opportunity for development of employability skills which cannot be delivered as part of curriculum subjects

30. The Community Challenge supports learners in engaging with their communities. This can lead to them committing to extracurricular activities outside college, which enhances them as a person and also enhances applications for employment and university.

31. One of the disadvantages of the WBQ is that it is still not universally accepted by all universities. The WBQ often takes the place of a fourth A

Level, so this potentially disadvantages learners where the WBQ is not accepted. Likewise, the format of the WBQ can seem repetitive for learners who have undertaken the qualification previously at different levels and pre-16.

32. The WBQ is not as relevant to learners on very practical skills-based qualifications that lead into work-based learning pathways and the academic outputs and assessments can disengage them from learning. It is difficult to implement the WBQ where there are classes of adult learners and 16-19 year old learners undertaking the same programme of study.
33. As referenced earlier, the national and foundation levels are impractical to implement in one year and create a huge burden of assessment as learners have complete the WBQ work and resit GCSEs, in addition to their main programme (in half the allocated time of the advanced programme). As a result, very few colleges undertake the WBQ at these levels. More widely, there is often too great a focus on the challenges rather than skills development.
34. The heavy assessment requirements at Advanced Level WBQ has often resulted in learners studying fewer A Level subjects. This has affected their progression opportunities (negatively) in some cases and has also had unintended consequences on curriculum.
35. The length of the WBQ year means that it can be difficult for some learners to complete the challenges by the deadlines in mid-May.