

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru | National Assembly for Wales

Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg | Children, Young People and Education Committee

Statws y Cymhwyster Bagloriaeth Cymru | The status of the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification

WB 14

Ymateb gan: Cymdeithas Arweinwyr Ysgolion a Cholegau
Response from: Association of School and College Leaders

1. The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents 19,000 heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads, business managers and other senior staff of maintained and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK.
ASCL Cymru represents school leaders in more than 90 per cent of the secondary schools in Wales.
2. ASCL has been a long-standing advocate of the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification (WBQ) since its inception. We believe that, in particular, the Skills Challenge Certificate (SCC) element provides young people with a series of experiences and training in skills that would otherwise not be available to them through standard qualifications. We have taken and will continue to take an active role in helping to develop the qualification and subsequently in publicising its benefits.
3. It is difficult to be definite about the extent to which the WBQ is both understood and valued as these two things tend to be quite different. We will therefore in this response look at them separately. In addition, there are significantly different responses with regard to the different groups mentioned who will be dealt with individually.
4. Education professionals who are involved with the WBQ in both schools and colleges tend to have a very high level of understanding of the qualification. They know intimately the requirements of it and are committed to its delivery. Those professionals who do not have regular contact with the WBQ tend to have a lower level of understanding and therefore are less likely to understand the benefits. As a result of discussions with school and college leaders we believe that the vast majority value the WBQ highly and can see significant benefits for students undertaking the qualification.

5. Students in schools and colleges who follow the WBQ are inevitably well versed in its detail and have a high level of understanding. However, many students perceive the qualification as something they are required to do, rather than something they would choose to do, which can lead some to adopt a very negative stance towards it. Discussions with former students who return to visit school after they have left to go to university or into work reveal that, in retrospect, they understand and value greatly the benefits of having done the qualification, but acknowledge that, at the time, they did not. This is not an unusual response with regard to many aspects of education and shows how perspectives can change with time and experience. Interestingly, we have come across a few cases of students who did not do the WBQ and subsequently have stated that they felt they missed out on some important and potentially valuable learning experiences.
6. Parents tend to have a lower level of understanding of the qualification, and their perspective often reflects the views of students who either are in the process of undertaking and have just completed the qualification. Whilst there are some good materials available for parents explaining what the WBQ is, they often appear not to have been understood properly. The fact that, for some parents, they perceive the WBQ as something that is “imposed” can cause problems for schools. In addition, there is often confusion over the difference between the Skills Challenge Certificate (SCC) element and the status of the WBQ as an over-arching qualification. The value of the WBQ for parents can all too often only be appreciated after the event, and some parents can find it difficult to understand why their son/daughter should be required to follow an additional course. The level of enthusiasm and support for the WBQ shown by the school leaders and staff at any particular school can have a significant impact on its perceived value to parents.
7. Education professionals in higher education (HE) institutions vary significantly in terms of their understanding of the WBQ. In our experience most Welsh HE institutions tend to have a better understanding and place greater value in the WBQ than some others. We hear many accounts of how university lecturers value the additional skills that students who have achieved the WBQ display. Admissions tutors tend to have a reasonable understanding, but frequently do not make offers to students that include the WBQ. This does not mean that they value the qualification less, but rather that either it allows them to make a slightly more generous offer or, after results, if the grades are just below the offer, the WBQ frequently will “tip the balance” in favour of that student being accepted. This element is difficult for students and parents to understand, but there is a growing level of evidence from schools and colleges that this is what happens.

8. Employers who have experience of students who have come to them with the WBQ tell us they value highly the additional skills that these young people possess. However, we tend to observe that many employers have, at best, a sketchy understanding of the WBQ and frequently do not consider it to be of any particular value. We would suggest this shows the need for a greater level of publicity and awareness-raising amongst employers, particularly those who may consider employing young people who have undertaken the WBQ.
9. With regard to the extent to which the WBQ is regarded to be an equivalent, rigorous qualification, there is a very mixed picture. Schools and colleges who teach the WBQ have a very clear understanding that there is rigour and that students have to achieve high standards to achieve the qualification. Similarly, students undertaking the qualification know all too well the level of effort that is required to achieve the WBQ. Indeed, there is some work to be done to ensure that the requirements are not too onerous, as currently the level of maintaining records of work can be excessive for both students and staff. Once again there still exists confusion between the WBQ as an over-arching qualification and the status of the SCC (see para 6 above). This is something that needs further exemplification, particularly for parents and employers who frequently do not understand the difference.
10. The Government's target for universal adoption displays a worthy intent but has created a few problems. We have numerous reports of schools on the border with England experiencing a significant number of students opting to study in England specifically in order to avoid having to undertake the WBQ. This is a major concern for those schools as the loss of those students can have a major impact on their ability to offer a broad range of sixth form courses.
11. Some other schools, particularly high-performing schools in urban areas, have decided to make the WBQ optional and that has created problems for those schools whose policy is for all students to follow the course. These issues present real challenges to the intent of universal adoption of the WBQ, and mean that there is an urgent need for a review of both the content and assessment rationale, and the ongoing impact of requiring universal adoption
12. We do not believe that studying the WBQ impacts in any negative way on the study of other curriculum subjects. Indeed, we find to the contrary that the skills set developed as part of the SCC can make a very valuable contribution towards more effective study across the board. Whilst there is no doubt that the WBQ is expensive to staff and run, we

feel that this cost is out-weighed by the benefits accrued to the students.

Conclusion

13. As leaders of educational professionals, we maintain our enthusiasm and support for the WBQ. We perceive there to be significant advantages to continuing to offer the qualification and would encourage the Welsh Government to maintain and develop it as something unique to Wales that is of significant value to our young people. However, we would also wish to highlight our concerns expressed above which, in our view represent areas that need clarification and possibly adjustments to be made to ensure the qualification achieves wider recognition and support from all stakeholders in education.
14. I hope that this is of value to your inquiry. ASCL Cymru would be happy to contribute to further discussions.