

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 16

Ymateb gan: Coleg Gŵyr Abertawe

Response from: Gower College Swansea

Introduction and context

Gower College Swansea is a general FE college with over 4,000 full time learners, 1,400 of these studying A levels and 1,700 studying on a range of vocational level 3 programmes. The college has strong outcomes with success rates for A levels performing at the top of the FE sector and pass rates for A levels regularly outperforming both the Swansea school and the Welsh average particularly at the higher grades.

Progression to university is very strong with UCAS acceptances consistently very high. In 2016/17 86% of the 1,082 learners who applied to university were accepted, which was 11% above the UK average. The successful acceptance rate has significantly exceeded the UK average for many years. Typically around 200 learners progress to Russell Group universities each year with success rates to Oxbridge regularly exceeding the UK average for FE colleges. Progression into highly competitive degree programmes such as Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Science is consistently impressive.

Currently the college offers the Advanced WBQ as an option for A level learners with only 5% choosing to take up that option. The college has attempted to make the Advanced WBQ compulsory for students studying on 2 year level 3 vocational programmes but this has proved challenging for the reasons stated in this response.

The college's response below, therefore, relates to the Advanced Level WBQ only. The Foundation and National WBQ levels are not deliverable alongside a one year programme and are repetitive for learners, so the college no longer offers these levels in line with the Cabinet Secretary for Education letter of the 13th October 2016 which says 'we expect progression, not repetition' and the expectation that 'colleges use their professional judgement in determining which learners should be undertaking the Welsh Baccalaureate at the relevant level according to their individual learning

pathway.' As such the college is assuming that it is now accepted that the Foundation and National levels do not have a place in FE.

Response

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

While learners who come from school have a clear understanding of the WBQ, from our experience, very few talk positively about the qualification. Many come to college with a negative attitude towards the WBQ and actively seek a course where the WBQ is not compulsory.

At open evenings many parents of prospective learners, especially those looking at A level options, query if the WBQ is compulsory and are relieved to hear that it is currently an option. There is concern amongst the parents of A level learners, that the WBQ will result in a high workload and will adversely affect grade outcomes. The majority of parents prefer their children to initially study 4 AS subjects to give them the flexibility to drop their weakest subject and continue with 3 subjects in year 2.

For some A level learners, once the benefits of WBQ are explained to them, they can see the value of it providing an alternative to an additional A level. For some learners gaining the WBQ as an additional qualification is of great value, affording them a progression pathway to HE which they might not have achieved if they had studied 3 A levels.

A local private school advertises that the WBQ is not compulsory, using that as a positive marketing tool to influence parents and attract business.

The value of the WBQ is in the experiences the Skills Challenges afford the learners, but in the case of vocational programmes such experiences are already an inherent part of the vocational programme and an additional qualification is not required for learners to get this benefit.

Teaching staff involved in the delivery of WBQ have worked very hard to understand the qualification and find delivery approaches that will make it work for learners, but this has been challenging for the reasons already identified in the recent review of the qualification by Qualifications Wales.

Teaching staff find particular value in the extended project (as do universities) especially for A level learners who are aspiring to HE. To this end the college has been increasingly offering the Extended Project Qualification to A level learners who are not opting to undertake the WBQ. This approach

ensures the learners are benefiting from undertaking an extended piece of research and written work without the added burden of undertaking the WBQ.

The value attributed to the WBQ by higher education is inconsistent. We have recent examples of students not being made offers by their preferred university as they only have 2 A levels and a WBQ grade. Even where universities' say they accept the WBQ, they do not always make an offer for 3 grades inclusive of the WBQ. We also have examples of learners refusing to complete the WBQ once they have received their HE offer as it does not include the WBQ

From our experience employers have a patchy understanding of the WBQ at best.

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

On one hand the qualification needs rigour if it is to be accepted as an A level equivalent by universities but it is the rigour of the assessment approach that has led to a qualification that is viewed as an unwelcome burden by many learners and teachers.

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 variability between departments and admissions tutors, which may relate to their views on the rigour of the qualification.

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

The prospect of Universal adoption causes considerable concern, both for A level and vocational learners. Studying the WBQ alongside a 3 A level programme or a 3 A level equivalent vocational programme, for the majority of learners, results in work overload and stress. Teachers are convinced that this has resulted in learners achieving lower grade profiles than they would have without the WBQ and adversely affected progression opportunities. We are clear that universal adoption would adversely affect our HE progression success rates and in particular our progression rates to Russell Group universities.

Teachers often talk about the pressure the WBQ puts their students under and can provide examples of learners in tears and dropping out of college due to the stress of the workload. With the current levels of concerns' about our youngsters' mental health should we be putting them under such pressure?

The college values the experiences that aspects of the WBQ bring but believe that those experiences can be delivered in a variety of ways, not necessarily through a qualification.

The WBQ must not become a barrier to further study, and we fear that universal adoption would do that. It is not in the learners' best interests to make the WBQ compulsory. We feel it important that we provide the best advice for each individual learner and we need the WBQ to be an option not compulsory in order for us to do this.

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

Many A level learners would not be able to manage the workload of 3 A level subjects plus the WBQ, so, if made compulsory many would reduce to 2 A levels subjects which can adversely impact on their progression choices.

In vocational areas teachers often report having to use time from their main area of study to get through the requirements of the WBQ. The assessment approach of the WBQ does not fit well with the approaches used on vocational programmes and makes it difficult to embed the WBQ in a seamless way. This results is a programme that feels disjointed for the learner and can disengage them.

In some curriculum areas, curriculum leaders have requested to reduce the size of their main qualification to make the full programme achievable because of the inclusion of the WBQ, but in doing do have adversely affected the progression options for some learners both in term of HE and entry to the workplace.

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

When delivered as part of a balanced programme (i.e. when the WBQ sits alongside 2 A levels or a 2 A level equivalent vocational programme) it can enrich the students experience, develop employability skills and the extended project can prepare students for progression to HE. However, if

inclusion of the WBQ results in an overloaded programme it results in a lower grade profile, stress and can lead to drop out.

The benefits of the WBQ can be achieved through building in other opportunities that are more relevant and focused on the students end goals without the need for an additional qualification and the assessment overload that brings. Vocational programmes which do not include the WBQ still provide a myriad of opportunities for learners to develop their employability skills through highly relevant structured activities. The WBQ is not necessary to ensure such valuable activity happens. In fact, for many vocational learners the assessment rigour disengages them and does not sit well with the practical work related nature of many programmes.

For some A level learners having the WBQ as an alternative approach to increasing UCAS points is valuable. However, this benefit very much depends on the university applied to. As previously stated the WBQ is still not universally accepted by all universities, and some learners can be disadvantaged by studying the WBQ. Our experience is that many top Universities say that they will accept the WBQ but still ask for 3 A Levels plus the WBQ i.e. in practical terms they don't accept it.

It is our experience that many schools are using the WBQ to make the lower ability A level learners up to a three A Level equivalent programme and while this is valuable for some, if WBQ became compulsory for all it would lead to a race to the bottom.