

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 10  
Ymateb gan: Comisiynydd Plant Cymru  
Response from: Children's Commissioner for Wales

**Date / Dyddiad:** 03/09/2018

**Subject / Pwnc:** The Status of the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification

### **Background information about the Children's Commissioner for Wales**

The Children's Commissioner for Wales' principal aim is to safeguard and promote the rights and welfare of children. In exercising their functions, the Commissioner must have regard to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The Commissioner's remit covers all areas of the devolved powers of the National Assembly for Wales that affect children's rights and welfare.

The UNCRC is an international human rights treaty that applies to all children and young people up to the age of 18. The Welsh Government has adopted the UNCRC as the basis of all policy making for children and young people and the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011 places a duty on Welsh Ministers, in exercising their functions, to have 'due regard' to the UNCRC.

This response is not confidential.

### **Response of the Children's Commissioner for Wales**

I welcome that this inquiry enables a focus on young people's experiences of the current Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification [WBQ]. I also note that findings about young people's experiences will be timely in terms of developing assessment processes for the new curriculum in Wales. My response relates to all foci of the inquiry around young people's experiences of the WBQ, namely:

the benefits and disadvantages of the qualification to young people; the extent to which the qualification is valued by young people; and the impact on young people of the Welsh Government target for universal adoption. Primarily my response is informed by the experiences and opinions of young people, which have been shared with my office through our programme of school engagement and participatory events, and also through my Investigation and Advice service.

In this response I make the following key points:

- That the aims and objectives of the WBQ fit well within a children’s rights approach and that young people’s experience of the qualification would be enhanced if the principles of a children’s rights approach more consistently informed the basis of the delivery;
- That the implementation of the target of universal adoption in its current form is not in the best interests of all young people, and as such contravenes an important Guiding Principle of the UNCRC;
- That the WBQ, particularly when it does not directly contribute to individual’s longer term goals, can increase the exam stress felt by young people, and can lead to detrimental impacts on their wellbeing and their ability to relax, play and engage in sports, culture and arts;
- That young people’s experiences of the WBQ are particularly valuable to consider in the development of assessment procedures for the new curriculum, to ensure that these uphold the rights of children and young people.

### **The Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification and a children’s rights approach**

In my guidance [The Right Way: A Children’s Rights Approach for Education in Wales](#) I explain how education settings can develop a children’s rights approach based on the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [UNCRC].<sup>1</sup> Although the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification [WBQ] is not framed as such, the WBQ is designed to include open-ended and learner-led opportunities and can be delivered well within a children’s rights approach. I also note that

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<sup>1</sup> [The Right Way: A Children’s Rights Approach for Education in Wales](#) Children’s Commissioner for Wales 2017

facilitation of the Skills Challenge Certificate [SCC] can enable young people to receive differentiated one-to-one support and individualised feedback<sup>2</sup>. This finding correlates well with the principles of individual planning and increased participation in the recently passed Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act and suggests that the delivery mechanism of the SCC is able to support young people with Additional Learning Needs where appropriate. It is my opinion that the experience of the qualification would be enhanced for young people if the principles of a children's rights approach more consistently informed the basis of the delivery. If the qualification provides an explicit opportunity for young people to engage in their learning as rights holders, this in itself enables them to develop as 'effective, responsible and active citizens'<sup>3</sup><sup>4</sup><sup>5</sup><sup>6</sup>, a key objective of the qualification at each specification. Such an approach would also provide a useful framework through which to realise the underlying aims of participatory and learner-led learning.

At both Key Stage 4 and post-16, the qualification can enable young people to exercise their right to take part in decision making (Article 12) by choosing particular areas for their skills challenge certificate. Several young people have expressed to my office that they have hugely valued being able to choose the focus of their individual project in particular and that this has enabled them to develop skills and knowledge in an area of interest to them. However, other young people have expressed frustration at the limits placed on the choices that are made available to them. It is clear that in some settings teachers direct classes to specific challenges for the Employability and Enterprise, Global Citizenship and Community components and that young people have no choice about these topics. Young people's experience of completing these components can also be through a teacher-led and prescriptive delivery. This represents a missed opportunity for young people to make their own choices about what and how they learn and means their experience of the WBQ is neither consistent with a children's rights approach nor with the stated aims and objectives of the qualification.

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<sup>2</sup> [New Qualifications](#) Estyn July 2018

<sup>3</sup> [Welsh Baccalaureate National / Foundation Key Stage 4 Specification](#) Welsh Joint Education Committee July 2016

<sup>4</sup> [Welsh Baccalaureate Foundation Post 16 Specification](#) Welsh Joint Education Committee July 2016

<sup>5</sup> [Welsh Baccalaureate National Post 16 Specification](#) Welsh Joint Education Committee July 2016

<sup>6</sup> [Welsh Baccalaureate Advanced Specification](#) Welsh Joint Education Committee July 2016

### **Universal adoption and the best interests of the child**

Decision making based on the best interests of the child (Article 3) is a Guiding Principle of the UNCRC, and as a cross-cutting right it must be applied to all rights, including those pertaining to education (Articles 28 and 29). My office is aware that the Welsh Government target for universal adoption has led to cases in which decision-making about courses of study does not appear to be based on the best interests of the young person. As criteria for being accepted into school sixth form provision usually includes a commitment to study the Welsh Baccalaureate in addition to A Levels, the qualification is often experienced by young people as a compulsory component if they wish to attend a school after Key Stage 4. This situation may arise even more frequently in coming years as the target given to schools for adoption at post-16 in 2019/20 is 100% (apart from some agreed categories of exclusions)<sup>7</sup>. My office has received cases through my Investigation and Advice Service in which this requirement has been perceived as compromising young people's future options, has led to conflict between the young person and their teachers, and has increased time-pressures and exam stress for young people.

In one of these cases a young person making an Oxbridge application received clear information from the university that the WBQ would not be valued as part of an application. Awarding a place was contingent on grades obtained in A Levels that had been taken in one sitting and a successful entrance exam. This meant it was necessary for this young person to take an extra A Level course in Year 13 to fulfil the requirement that the entire specification was examined at the same time, in addition to preparing for an entrance exam. The young person made a request to the school not to take the WBQ during Year 13 but this was rejected by the Head teacher who instructed the young person that if they did not engage with the course this would be reflected in the reference provided by the school.

For assistance, the family of the young person contacted Assembly Members, and following this it appears that advice was given by Welsh Government officials to both the family and the school.

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<sup>7</sup> [The new post 16 Welsh Baccalaureate: Recording and Measuring Outcomes](#) Welsh Government May 2016

The Head teacher subsequently agreed that the young person would be exempted from attending lessons. Despite this exemption the young person still needed to include the WBQ on their UCAS application as they were registered to sit the examination, although they would not be submitted for the examination. The family of the young person understand this step was taken so that the school could meet their set target for the adoption of the qualification.

This case raises important implications for individual young people in the implementation of Welsh Government's target of universal adoption at post-16. It appears that the advice given has created an exemption for one pupil who would ordinarily be required to enter in order for the school to meet the performance measure that has been set by government. Other pupils in the same school, facing the same or similar circumstances, were still required to sit the WBQ in order for the school to meet this measure. This is an inequitable situation and implicit within it is a recognition by government that the implementation of the target of universal adoption, particularly with next year's target of 100% adoption at post-16<sup>8</sup>, is not in the best interests of all young people, and as such contravenes an important Guiding Principle of the UNCRC.

### **Additional pressures and wellbeing of young people**

In another case received by my office a young person contacted us directly to express their worry about the increased pressure the WBQ added to their education at post-16. This young person felt disadvantaged by taking the WBQ as they felt it would reduce their ability to achieve the A Level grades needed for them to successfully gain a university place and would also mean they would have to stop playing music to give more time for study. The very aims of the qualification are to develop a wide range of skills through purposeful and meaningful experiences. The breadth of the course does indeed support many young people in Wales to do this<sup>9</sup> but the implementation of the universal adoption target leads to such pressure for some young people that ability to engage in extra-curricular activities is restricted. Curtailing the development of a young person's extra-curricular talents limits the holistic development of the full potential of the child as specified by

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> [Review of the Design and Assessment Model of the Skills Challenge Certificate and its place within the Welsh Baccalaureate](#) Qualifications Wales April 2018

Article 29 of the UNCRC and also restricts their experience of their right to relax and play (Article 31). As detailed in my [Spotlight Report: Article 31](#), young people frequently describe schoolwork as a dominating force that leaves little opportunity for other things.<sup>10</sup> The pressure of taking additional qualifications that are not perceived as directly contributing to long-term goals can increase barriers for young people to play and take part in sport, leisure and art.

This case also highlights that when the WBQ is not valued by young people to the same extent as other qualifications taken concurrently, it is experienced as an additional pressure that can increase the anxiety felt by young people and can lead to detrimental impacts on their wellbeing. This is relevant to young people in Further Education as well as in Sixth Forms, as Estyn have found that only a minority of learners in Further Education would take the qualification out of choice.<sup>11</sup> Increasing the pressure experienced by young people is of particular concern when anxiety is the second highest reason for young people attending counselling in Wales, with 23% of young people attending in 2016-7 with anxiety as the main presenting issue.<sup>12</sup> This resonates with the finding of the Health Behaviours in School-aged Children survey that 59% of young people in Year 11 feel pressured by schoolwork<sup>13</sup>. Young people are also expressing that they need more guidance and support, with 65.9% of children and young people responding to a Senedd survey into emotional wellbeing stating that they would like to learn more about how to look after their emotional wellbeing and mental health<sup>14</sup>.

### **Implications for future qualification developments**

Young people have described their experiences around the Welsh Baccalaureate to my office with some candour. Young people have told my office that at both Key Stage 4 and post-16 'loads of teachers hate Welsh Bacc' and explained that this makes it hard for them to feel enthusiastic about

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<sup>10</sup> [Spotlight Report: Article 31](#) Children's Commissioner for Wales 2018.

<sup>11</sup> [New Qualifications](#) Estyn July 2018

<sup>12</sup> [Counselling for children and young people 2016/17](#) Welsh Government 2018.

<sup>13</sup> [Health Behaviour in School-aged Children \(HBSC\) Wales: key findings](#). Welsh Government. 2015. 2013/14

<sup>14</sup> [Emotional well-being and mental health of children and young people](#). National Assembly for Wales. 2017.

it themselves. This is reinforced by Estyn's findings that young people's attitudes generally reflect the status accorded to the qualification by their teachers and noting that while there are generally positive attitudes to the SCC among young people there is also 'too much variation' in the enthusiasm and expertise among teachers delivering the course<sup>15</sup>. Young people have also described the qualification to my office as both confusing and repetitive, as the components for the skills challenge certificate at Key Stage 4 are repeated at post-16. One young person told me that they do not want a qualification system that is not well-recognised outside of Wales, stating that they do not wish to feel 'stuck in Wales'.

Young people's experience of the WBQ, with its emphasis on the assessment of skills in cross-curricular application, will be essential to take into consideration in the development of assessment as part of the new curriculum in Wales. I have been frustrated by Welsh Government's lack of systematic engagement with young people in the development of the new curriculum to Wales to date. I will continue to call on government to engage young people in curriculum developments and young people's experiences of the WBQ are particularly valuable to consider in the development of fair and well-received assessment procedures, which uphold and promote the rights of children in Wales.

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<sup>15</sup> [New Qualifications](#) Estyn July 2018