

Children, Young People and Education Committee

Roundtable Stakeholder Event for the Inquiry into the Status of the Welsh Baccalaureate: 26 September 2018

On 26 September, as part of its inquiry into the Status of the Welsh Baccalaureate, the Members of the Children, Young People and Education Committee held a roundtable event to hear the views of stakeholders about the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification and its benefits and disadvantages. Discussions were based around the following five key themes:

- Theme 1: 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.
- Theme 2: 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.
- Theme 3: 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.
- Theme 4: The wider impact of studying the Welsh Baccalaureate on other curriculum subjects and education provision.
- Theme 5: The benefits and disadvantages of the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification to learners, schools and colleges, higher education institutions and employers.

This note summarises views expressed by stakeholders during the event and are not attributed to individuals. The views expressed are those of individual stakeholders and not necessarily the views of their organisations, the National Assembly for Wales or Assembly Members.

Value and understanding

The terms “Welsh Bacc” and “Skills Challenge Certificate” are often used interchangeably, but not always accurately. This was seen as an illustration that there is a lack of understanding and significant confusion about the qualification and how it works.

The extent to which the Welsh Bacc is valued varied across relevant audiences (staff, pupils, employers, parents, HEIs etc). Where it is seen as a “bolt on” rather than an integral part of education, it is less valued – but changing culture in this regard was seen as a challenge in many cases. The more it is understood, the more it is valued – and there was a perception that acceptance is growing and its value is increasing;



The concept of the Welsh Bacc was seen as very broad. Pupils at Key Stage 4 are quite young to be studying it, which makes it difficult to explain exactly what it is. This also makes it quite difficult to teach. There is no such thing as a Welsh Bacc textbook or a single teaching resource, which makes understanding it even more difficult.

Many schools teach and value the Welsh Bacc, but it is inconsistently taught in schools. The SCC is such a different qualification that teachers may not be confident in teaching it. Some expressed the view that there is a need to have a Welsh Bacc department in every school.

The attitude of school leaders was considered to be critical to the success of the Welsh Bacc. In many cases where senior management are more supportive they allow adequate training for staff, which will increase the confidence and the ability for staff to deliver teaching effectively.

There are some perception issues which are largely to do with a legacy of negativity from the previous Welsh Bacc. It was suggested that schools and colleges should share good practice – and that although there are good networks in place in some places it is a work in progress.

Pupils

The Skills Challenge Certificate (SCC) is valued more by students planning on going on to further academic study than those planning on pursuing vocational routes. This is because they value the UCAS points it represents. As a result, colleges struggle to engage vocational learners with the Welsh Bacc.

There was widespread agreement that pupils tend to value the Welsh Bacc more looking back at it retrospectively – while cautious / reluctant at the beginning, they value the skills developed by the end of the process.

Where it is taught well, students are enthusiastic and younger learners are excited at the prospect of studying the Welsh Bacc. It was suggested that more pupils are requesting the opportunity to study the Welsh Bacc.

The value attributed to it by pupils is heavily dependent on who is teaching it – if delivered effectively, the perception of its value increases. This links to the general views expressed about the value of the Welsh Bacc in schools.

Where it is valued, it tends to be on the basis that it enables individuals to develop skills that aren't necessarily developed in other GCSE/A-level courses – e.g. independent study, research skills, “softer” skills (e.g. dealing with people). Where it isn't valued, it tends to be based on perceptions that:

- its contents can be repetitive in nature from KS4 to KS5 (e.g. ‘skills audit’ and ‘reflection’ elements);
- it limits options in terms of other subjects/time for other study;



- it is not valued by HEIs or employers in the same way as GCSEs/A-levels.

Staff

The views of staff seemed to be influenced significantly by the status (and associated resources) afforded to the Welsh Bacc by a school/college's senior leadership team (SLT) – the more support (in terms of status and resource) it gets from SLT, the more it tends to be valued.

Those delivering the Welsh Bacc felt overwhelmed by the workload. Many teachers see it as a lot of additional work that assumes pre-existing knowledge that they do not necessarily have. It involves a lot of assessment work, and there are a lot of logistics in terms of organising activities and visits. This has a knock on effect on other subjects.

The extent to which it is valued by teachers depends on how it is timetabled. Views were expressed that it is not always given enough priority or enough time. There is also a lot of inconsistency in the hours of provision assigned to delivery of the Welsh Bacc – depends a lot on the level of buy in from the school's leadership team.

There were strong views that having a department dedicated to SCC, with dedicated staff, was key to its success.

It was also suggested that there is mixed enthusiasm amongst teachers for the Welsh Bacc. Often, junior or less motivated staff are assigned to work on it as it is not prioritised adequately by schools.

HEIs

The value attached to the Welsh Bacc varies within as well as between HEIs, with very mixed messages being given to pupils about the extent to which it is accepted for admission purposes. Whether Uni's accept the Welsh Bacc was seen by some as 'pot luck', especially as admissions criteria are down to individual schools within universities.

However, it was accepted that Universities are becoming more aware and are more accepting of the Welsh Bacc in England as well as in Wales.

One benefit for learners is that they are able to draw on what they have learned in the Welsh Bacc for their personal statements in HEIs.

Parents and employers

There was agreement from all areas that there was a significant lack of understanding about the Welsh Bacc beyond pupils and staff. Some parents accept the Welsh Bacc,



but may not understand it. It was also suggested that some parents tend not to want their child doing the Welsh Bacc instead of a more traditional subject.

Parents also don't value the Welsh Bacc because they see it as a barrier to children going to university. Some parents are contacting schools to withdraw their children from the WB (or from the school if WB is compulsory) due to a perception that WB will be detrimental to their progress in other subjects/admission to the top universities. However, it was suggested that this was the minority of parents, but those who are opposed to the Welsh Bacc are more vocal and it is the negative views that get the airtime.

Not enough was done to sell the Welsh Bacc when it was re-launched. The Welsh Government and Qualifications Wales need to undertake a significant PR campaign to explain its benefits (to all audiences) to address the lack of kudos attached to it. This could include engaging more with pupils and parents at year 9.

Employers, on the whole seem, to know very little about it (unless their own children have studied the WB). This was especially relevant with smaller employers. It was suggested that there should be an initiative to engage with employers, although there was a note of caution as experience in England has shown that some employers have become too involved with the T level qualifications.

There was a view that employers want the skills that are in the Welsh Bacc but do not realise that those skills are covered in its content.

In terms of employers, the benefits may be realised over time because it cascades down as they employ learners who have the Welsh Bacc. There is a need to market it better to smaller employers so they understand that the qualification offers a range of skills essential to the workplace.

If the name of the qualification was changed, this might increase awareness or acceptance of it by employers – examples provided included just using 'skills challenge' or change it to 'employability skills' or 'real world skills'.

Complexity

There was agreement from a wide range of stakeholders that the Welsh Bacc as currently designed is overly complex. Some reasons for this were:

- the read across to other qualifications can be challenging;
- the grading structure is too complicated and marking schemes too complex;
- the administrative work associated with the WB is overly complicated and burdensome (for pupils and staff)

If the WB was simplified it would be better understood. Once better understood, it would be more valued.



Equivalent and rigorous qualification

The extent to which the Welsh Bacc is considered to be an equivalent qualification depends very much on the approach taken in schools. In order to deliver it effectively you need people who believe in the qualification and are committed in the long-term. However, for some teachers delivering the Welsh Bacc this is their third subject.

Pupils often do not view it as an equivalent (although that depends a lot on the status attached to it by their school/college – the higher the status, the more it is seen as an equivalent). KS5 Welsh Bacc tends to be more valued than KS4 by pupils.

HEIs are increasingly recognising it as an equivalent qualification, although inconsistencies remain across and within institutions. There appears to be a particular problem in Welsh universities (which participants speculated may be a result of the poor reputation of the first iteration of the qualification).

The Welsh Bacc is a large and challenging workload for pupils, and this may result in pupils' negativity. It was suggested by some that the SCC is "more than you need to do for GCSEs/A-level" – while it may not be more difficult, it is more demanding in terms of volume and time commitment.

There was agreement with the recommendation of Qualifications Wales that there should be fewer 'challenges' within the Welsh Bacc. There were also some calls for more external assessment to replace internal controlled assessment in the interests of rigour and to ease the burdens on school staff.

The administration rather than the teaching itself was considered to be more onerous on the SCC than A-levels/GCSEs

Status and the impact of universal adoption

There is a significant and detrimental lack of clarity around the "mandatory" nature of the Bacc and the performance measures associated with it. People had different views about what 'universal adoption' means. Some people think it means all pupils should do it, while others thought it meant all schools should offer the choice.

Some stakeholders thought that the SCC should be compulsory and learners should not be denied the opportunity to study the Welsh Bacc. There was a view, however, that there are issues that need to be ironed out before universal adoption.

Some stakeholders said that the Welsh Bacc should not be made mandatory until the content, approach and resource is absolutely right (which it isn't at the moment). Even in such circumstances, participants were worried that some pupils would be set up to fail due to the requirement to have English/Welsh and Maths GCSE to be able to pass it (which, for many, is difficult).



Adoption of the Welsh Bacc is applied inconsistently, for example some schools and colleges require all their students to take it post-16 yet others allow students to opt out. There was some confusion as to whether performance measures encourage schools towards universal adoption but there was some recognition that if they did then schools would have to prioritise the Welsh Bacc more than they do now.

Some school representatives believed that despite attempts to make it universal, the Welsh Bacc is not going to be accessible for all pupils and universal adoption is therefore unrealistic. Some pupils will not have the capability and are better off having basic literacy and numeracy interventions. They believed, therefore, that the Welsh Bacc should be universal but that some pupils should be exempt from this where teachers felt that there were more appropriate routes of learning for them.

However, there was also a view that pupils should not be able to opt out because they didn't want to study the Welsh Bacc or because they wanted to do other subjects instead. This was an important distinction drawn.

Funding was raised as a potential issue if it was made compulsory – the view was if it was funded in the same way as other subjects then it would be an educational decision as to whether a learner should do it rather than a capacity / resources issue. College representatives were concerned about funding should it become compulsory and the impact on outcomes data.

Other curriculum subjects and education provision

Concerns were expressed that the Welsh Bacc may have resulted in reductions in the take-up of some humanities subjects, and modern foreign languages. While some attributed this to the Welsh Bacc directly, others attributed it to a stronger emphasis on / priority afforded to STEM subjects.

There is concern about the consistency in moderation of the Welsh Bacc, particularly in relation to any read across with other curriculum subjects. Syllabuses and assessment criteria need to be clearer and intrinsic link is needed with A-level/GCSE subjects.

Funding arrangements were considered to be inconsistent and need to be clarified. Funding for the Welsh Bacc varies from LA to LA in relation to schools, and in turn, between schools and FE colleges.

There was general agreement that the structure of the Welsh Bacc should wrap around the Donaldson reforms and this should make it easier for Welsh Bacc learners to embrace the new curriculum.

Benefits and disadvantages



Benefits

Where it is delivered well, Welsh Bacc develops “independent learners”, research skills, “multi-skilled” individuals, pupils who need “less spoon feeding”.

The project element of the Skills Challenge Certificate is a particularly useful part of the Welsh Bacc. At Advanced level, it prepares young people for higher education, equipping them with research and individual study skills.

Welsh Bacc helps to contribute to the wider community. It also has a positive impact on the ethos of the school as it involves the community.

Many soft skills are developed in the WB (such as using the telephone for business purposes) as well as other life skills such as dealing with finances.

It encourages behaviours such as compassion and confidence.

It can have a very positive effect on student well-being to have an exam free qualification which uses a different set of skills.

Disadvantages

The lack of clarity about its value is unsettling and affects the general perception of the qualification (which in turn impacts on how valuable pupils and others feel it is).

To pass (and meet performance measures) pupils may end up “spoon fed” to get through it (although this is true of all subjects, not just WB).

30 hour community participation work is a big commitment (perhaps too big). Many feel the time it requires isn't met with the necessary recognition in terms of marks – it is only the review of the participation that counts, rather than the participation itself (which staff and pupils feel undervalues it).

Other issues

There is a need to look more carefully at trends in the last couple of years which seem to suggest that getting the top grades in the SCC is more difficult than achieving the top grades in GCSEs/A-levels.

Some students work with feeder primary schools in coaching and mentoring. However, there are issues regarding DBS checks for the students – students who are going into primary schools need to have and pay for DBS checks as it is required as part of studying for a qualification.

School budgets are a barrier to success – to release staff to support work with students in the community and for CPD (and cover). It could be incentivised through funding.

