

# Children, Young People and Education Committee

School Visits for the Inquiry into the Status of the Welsh Baccalaureate: 4 October 2018

On 4 October, as part of its inquiry into the Status of the Welsh Baccalaureate, the Members of the Children, Young People and Education Committee visited a number of schools/colleges around Wales to hear the views of pupils on the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification (the Welsh Bacc) 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 Qualification 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 Qualification 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 pupils during the visits and are not attributed to individuals or to the individual schools/colleges. The views expressed are also not necessarily the views of the schools/colleges visited, the National Assembly for Wales or Assembly Members.



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.

## **Purpose**

There was broad consensus that there is a significant lack of clarity about – and understanding of – the purpose of the Welsh Bacc. Some students thought that the Welsh Bacc was useful however some expressed views such as “it can be a hollow course”, “there is nothing to get your teeth into”, and “it’s a course with no substance”.

Some students felt that the objectives of the Welsh Bacc needed to be set out more clearly. It was felt that they were quite broad and general, and that while pupils may be aware what they are doing they do not necessarily know why – the objectives could be broken down into smaller areas. Others thought that there was too much reporting of skills rather than actually developing them, with “too much preparation” a general complaint

## **Components of the Bacc**

There was general agreement that the Skills Challenge Certificate is really useful, and delivers its intended purpose. Some learners felt it was really useful in developing life skills. However, some said it would be beneficial if it were clearer how the SCC relates to future study (e.g. there are similarities in the independent study to writing a dissertation).

Some learners enjoyed studying the Welsh Bacc. They really enjoyed the emphasis on enterprise, community projects and independent learning. The least useful was seen to be the Global Challenge which some said should be scrapped.

Some students said they would like to see more learning about “real world” issues within the Welsh Bacc such as financial education and. One learner reported that their PSE lessons had become Welsh Bacc lessons, so the life skills learned in PSE had disappeared.

## **Value**

Welsh Bacc is seen as very positive post-16 but a ‘waste of time’ pre-16. There is also duplication. Best to just have it post-16.

There was a perception that the Welsh Bacc is not respected and not really a ‘subject’. However those with older siblings who had studied it said it was easier to see the benefits.



Some pupils reported being ‘spoon fed’ in order to ensure that the Welsh Bacc was finished, diminishing any real value of the qualification.

Some pupils liked that advanced Welsh Bacc did not require an exam and welcomed the opportunity to pursue something that was less formal and academic than A-levels. However, not all believed that this made up for the time commitment involved in the qualification as it is currently structured. On that basis, they felt that to be more valuable, it would need to be lot more streamlined.

Some pupils stated that the advanced Welsh Bacc’s value only extended to acting as a back-up for grades to enter university, or a tool that enabled the dropping of one A-level.

## **Parents**

Many pupils said that parents do not understand the value of the Welsh Bacc, explaining that many of them think it takes time away from studying other subjects. Students attributed this to the fact that parents have not necessarily studied a similar qualification and so do not necessarily understand it or encourage their children to embrace it.

## **Higher education**

Students agreed that most universities now accept the Welsh Bacc, with some exceptions. There were concerns about whether universities outside Wales see its value, although there was limited hard evidence that it was actually not accepted. Some universities nearer to Wales e.g. Bristol / Bath were seen to view it favourably.

In relation to applying to university, some students stated that the Welsh Bacc had been “really useful” when completing personal statements on UCAS forms, helping to strengthen the application.

Students also recognised that universities may also accept lower grades in other subjects if a pass in the Welsh Bacc had been achieved. They noted, however, that this may not be appreciated until after the qualification had been completed, and suggested that this should be made clear from the start so that students put more effort into it.

## **Communications**

Some students said that there could be benefits to changing the qualification’s name. They expressed the view that English universities do not fully understand what the Welsh Bacc actually involves, that it is not just about Wales, and that it is about the skills you develop. One particular recommendation was to remove the word ‘Welsh’ from the name and replace it with another word e.g. ‘Skills Baccalaureate’.



There was broad agreement that a marketing strategy was needed to educate non Welsh universities and employers. It was also felt that a marketing strategy was needed for parents as many had no idea what the qualification was.

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.

Some learners felt the Welsh Bacc was a rigorous qualification. The course work was seen as intense, but the individual project was viewed as good for pupils to learn independently.

Other students said that the Welsh Bacc is promoted as an “easy qualification” without an exam. They emphasised that the difficulty was due to volume rather than complexity. They also noted that the grading was very difficult to follow, and that they had no idea what grade to expect at the end. Their overall aim was to finish it rather than achieve any specific quality.

There was a view that Welsh Bacc used to be an easier qualification and that is why universities don't accept it – however it is no longer seen as an easy option but universities haven't caught up.

## Skills

There was a mix of views about the skills developed as part of the advanced Welsh Bacc:

- Those studying the humanities felt that many of the skills developed as part of it (e.g. referencing sources, extended writing etc). are equally possible to develop by studying A-levels only.
- People gravitate towards the areas with which they are most comfortable when completing the group-based work – e.g. where numeracy work is involved, those who are strong in maths complete it while those who are not are able to avoid it.
- As such, many of the exercises that form part of it are viewed as being “pointless” either duplicating skills already learned at national/foundation level or forcing subjects that pupils have already chosen to drop for good reason.

Some pupils described their experience of the advanced Welsh Bacc as a lot of ‘copying and pasting’ from GCSE level and padding it out with extra ‘waffle’. It was suggested by a number of pupils that they had been encouraged to do this by teachers.

Some pupils queried the benefit of having a qualification they viewed as focusing on ‘life skills’. Furthermore, they agreed that if ‘life skills’ did need to be taught, it would be better



to do that outside a formal qualification, in weekly PSE lessons, for example. It was felt that this would be more efficient and beneficial.

Others said the Welsh Bacc seemed to focus on those who want to go on to higher education and maybe not as much on those who want to go on to an apprenticeship or employment.

There was a feeling that the breadth of tasks involved diluted the overall value of the Welsh Bacc – pupils felt it would be better to be able to concentrate on a handful, rather than all, elements, depending on their own skills, interests and future plans.

### **Influence of – and impact on – teachers**

There was a strong view that when teachers are enthusiastic and positive about the Welsh Bacc, this transfers to the learners. But, there was a view that teachers do not have enough training, and it would be better to have more dedicated Welsh Bacc teachers, in order to teach it properly.

Some expressed the view that it is hard to take Welsh Bacc seriously when teachers do not. One student said he had heard a teacher saying they had drawn the ‘short straw’ with regards to teaching Bacc. It was felt that this ‘short straw’ attitude rubs off on pupils.

A number of students referred to a lack of specialist Welsh Bacc teachers, stating that teachers are not qualified to teach Welsh Bacc in the same way as they are for the specialist subject.

The pressure on teachers created by the Welsh Bacc is ‘enormous’, especially as many lack formal training. In some cases the senior leadership team have to lead on it due to a lack of teachers’ time. There have been instances of schools having to run holiday and after-school sessions to get the work finished.

Sometimes subject teachers aren’t on board with the Welsh Bacc, and there was a view that there needs to be more co-operation with other departments within schools. Teachers see it as Welsh Bacc days that take away teaching time from other subjects.

### **Relative priority and workload**

Some students commented that it can be difficult to find opportunities to complete the 30-hour community challenge because of the time commitment involved and the number of pupils looking for opportunities within the same community which may be limited. This can become a time burden on the school, with staff often having to help pupils find a suitable challenge or devise something within the school to meet the criteria.



Other students said that the workload is manageable, and can be done in their own time, but some did not like this as they struggle with being self-motivated. Students commented that their would be useful if the individual project could focus on something they might be choosing to study in university.

Some pupils thought that there was not enough Welsh Bacc teaching time available, with some receiving only one 1 hour lesson per week . Some students explained that there are occasions the Welsh Bacc gets pushed to the side when other subjects become more intense and when UCAS forms need to be completed.

The amount of time allocated differed between the schools visited. It was also noted that on some occasions the Welsh Bacc was left squeezed in at the end of the term.

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.

### **Choice**

While most students thought the Welsh Bacc was valuable, most agreed it should be optional as there may be specific reasons why some learners do not want to study it. Some learners said they should have a choice in studying it, as being forced to do so could have a negative impact on them.

Some said that if the Welsh Bacc was compulsory then students generally would enjoy it less. It was noted, however, that if it was not compulsory, “no-one would take it”. Pupils reported that very few would choose to take it if they had the choice because they view it as a barrier to – and distraction from – their other subjects.

Some students who did not want to study the Welsh Bacc said that they were, in hindsight, glad that they did.

It was suggested that the Welsh Bacc could be compulsory, but that there could be set exemption criteria e.g. the number of A/S or A levels being taken.

### **Impact on wellbeing**

The Welsh Bacc was also seen as stressful if pupils were forced to do it when there may be a relevant reason why they might not want to. Other pupils said that they were working



into the early hours of the morning to finish their work, which was having an effect on their mental health.

### **Impact on choice of learning centre**

Pupils reported that one of the main reasons contemporaries had cited for leaving school at 16 to go to college was to avoid having to take the Welsh Bacc. They noted that this, in some cases, meant leaving Welsh medium education when they would otherwise have stayed in a Welsh language sixth form.

There was a suggestion that joint working with other schools could streamline teaching of the Welsh Bacc, which would benefit students.

Theme 4: The wider impact of studying the Welsh Baccaulaureate on other curriculum subjects and education provision.

### **Impact on options**

A number of students highlighted that teaching the Welsh Bacc takes up time, which can limit options. They also said that, because optional subjects also take up 2 – 3 hours a week, an extra subject could have been chosen if it were not for the Bacc. At one school visited the Bacc took up one of the GCSE with a direct impact on the choice available to students.

### **Skills transfer**

Some students stated that the skills learned in the SCC are not necessarily transferrable to other subjects, but are useful for everyday life. They felt that it helped with confidence building but that its benefits rely on the individual making the most of the opportunities it provides

Those students who were not academic questioned its use but acknowledged it develops some skills.

It was felt that the Challenges make things “feel more real and more relevant” to everyday life e.g. some students commented that the Enterprise challenge was “really helpful” as it taught them about finances and they had the opportunity to speak with local businesses.



## Workload

Many students stated that the group work can be very demanding with a detrimental effect on some learners' progress in other subjects. Some also suggested that, in the case of group work, one person can bring everyone's grade down.

Theme 5: The benefits and disadvantages of the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification to learners, schools and colleges, higher education institutions and employers.

Many of the benefits and disadvantages highlighted by students are listed under the previous four themes. However, other comments included:

- The Welsh Bacc gives real world examples, with people underestimating the real world value of it.
- The Welsh Bacc gives you the opportunity to work with others which develops communication skills, which helps when working in real world. However some thought that when working with others, it is usually the case that stronger personalities take over and do not give others the opportunity to have their voices / ideas heard.
- The skills learned in the Welsh Bacc can be useful in other subjects.
- All students have the opportunity to develop skills such as extended essay writing, something which may not be developed to the same extent in their chosen subjects e.g. maths or sciences.
- There is value in the volunteering aspect of the Welsh Bacc and which helps develop skills e.g. confidence to speak etc. However, knowing you have to write up the experience afterwards is not good.

A past pupil attending one of the visits said that the individual project stands out as something he enjoyed and has found most useful since leaving school. He explained that it prepared him for university by giving him the opportunity to develop research skills, sticking to word limits, using Harvard referencing etc.

