

## Briefing for the Petitions Committee

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 5 Rhagfyr 2017  
Petitions Committee | 5 December 2017

### Research Briefing: Remove the compulsory aspect of the Welsh Baccaulaureate

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Petition number: **P-05-788**

Petition title: **Remove the compulsory aspect of Welsh Baccaulaureate**

Text of petition:

We call on the National Assembly for Wales to urge the Welsh Government to remove the compulsory aspect of the Welsh Baccaulaureate and review the structure of the course to ensure it is fit for purpose. Currently it includes a task that encourages underage gambling and fiscal irresponsibility.

Our children deserve the right to excel in a global arena. Around 70% of their studies are already compulsory subjects and the Welsh Baccaulaureate takes away opportunities from them as they cannot study all the subjects they want to pursue. This 'qualification' may cater to box ticking exercises but does not help Welsh students achieve their potential (please see excerpt from a WG report that follows). This will have a detrimental effect on the rest of their lives and future career prospects. Give children studying in Welsh schools the same opportunities as those from the other home nations and make Welsh education something to be proud of again.

The following is taken from The Welsh Governments own report into the WBQ (The Welsh Baccaulaureate Qualification, January 2015) states – The findings of WISERD's report were primarily two-fold. It concluded that the WBQ was enormously valuable in preparing young people for higher education, quite possibly due to the weighting given to it by the UCAS tariff. At the same time, the report supported a previous finding in a 2011 report specifically on Cardiff University that the WBQ Core was not equivalent to an A grade at A-level. Furthermore, it concluded that students with the WBQ were more likely to withdraw from university and less likely to achieve a 'good degree' which is defined as a First Class or Upper Second Class.

The report argues that these two findings may be related. It concludes that having the WBQ seems to improve the probability of getting in to university, all other things being equal; but this advantage seems

to come at the expense of successful university outcomes.

## 1. Cabinet Secretary's response

In her letter to the Committee, the Cabinet Secretary for Education states that:

- The research referred to by the Petitioner ([Wales Institute of Social & Economic Research, Data & Methods \(WISERD\)](#)) (2013) was based on a previous iteration of the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification (WBQ). A revised WBQ has been in place since September 2015;
- The **WBQ is not compulsory**;
- Qualifications Wales are currently undertaking a review of the WBQ (to be published in the Autumn term).

## 2. Overview of the Welsh Baccalaureate

The Welsh Government commissioned the [Independent Review of Qualifications](#) (2012) that recommended that the Welsh Government should establish a revised and more rigorous Welsh Baccalaureate model. The WBQ was redesigned and the new specifications were taught from **September 2015**. The revised WBQ is based on a Skills Challenge Certificate, which is graded, and Supporting Qualifications.

It is awarded at three levels:

- Foundation Welsh Baccalaureate (level 1) for use at Key Stage 4 or post-16;
- National Welsh Baccalaureate (level 2) for use at Key Stage 4 or post-16;
- Advanced Welsh Baccalaureate (level 3) for use at post-16 only.

Alongside the Skills Challenge Certificate, learners take a selection of GCSE, AS, and A level and vocational qualifications appropriate to their needs in order to be awarded the WBQ.

## 3. Compulsory nature of the WBQ

The Cabinet Secretary states that the **WBQ is not compulsory for pupils**. In the [Children, Young People and Education Committee on 18 October 2017](#), Darren Millar, AM said that 'some schools are expressing concerns that they feel strong-armed, almost, into ensuring that the Welsh bac is something that has to be taken post 16'. In response, Kirsty Williams, Cabinet Secretary for Education said:

The decision to allow some students not to participate has to be a decision for the headteachers in those classrooms, but I am clear that there are very real benefits to Welsh students studying the Welsh baccalaureate. We encourage schools and colleges to be able to allow their students to do it, but for each individual student, that has to be a decision for the headteacher within that school; I can't micromanage that process. I'm sure that if a headteacher genuinely thought that somebody's chances of obtaining a place at Oxford or Cambridge or a Russell Group university were severely being disadvantaged because of participating in the Welsh bac, those professional people would

make the right decisions. Because, once again, it's a badge of honour for a school to get pupils into Oxford and Cambridge or Russell Group universities; that's one of the ways in which they demonstrate their success as an institution. So, I think it would be massively inconceivable that a school would go out of its way to force a pupil to do a qualification if they genuinely believed that that was jeopardising their chances of that student going on to fulfil their potential.

The Cabinet Secretary's official clarified that the Welsh Government 'actively encourage' the take-up of the WBQ post-16. He said:

The documentation is equally clear with the phraseology, 'where appropriate'. So, there isn't the expectation that every young person in full-time learning in Wales at post 16 will undertake the Welsh baccalaureate. It has many advantages as a qualification—some of them around the employability skills that were referred to earlier in committee—and it does produce, for those who take it, perhaps a more rounded individual than somebody just undertaking an academic period of study, but it is not compulsory and it is down to the institution and the learner to decide whether or not they were going to undertake that qualification.

#### 4. Universities acceptance of the WBQ

In oral evidence to the Children, Young People and Education Committee on 18 October 2017, the Cabinet Secretary said in relation to universities' acceptance of the WBQ:

We are actively working with universities across the United Kingdom for recognition of the Welsh bac, and you'll be aware that the reformed Welsh bac, which now has a grading system similar to that of A-levels, attracts UCAS points [...] there are many, many universities that will use the UCAS point scores from a Welsh bac as part of the offer. For other universities, if they don't do that, they use the process of a Welsh bac as a way of differentiating Welsh students from other students, because our students undertaking this course have got a personal statement and an interview perspective that I believe sets them apart, because they're able to demonstrate that, 'Yes, I can cope with an academic load', which is what our Russell Group universities are looking for—'I can cope with an academic load, but I'm not just about the academic; I've got a whole range and set of skills that I can bring to this university on top of those grades.' So, I think we need to look at it in the round, at what it offers students.

She subsequently [wrote to the Committee on 31 October 2017](#) stating:

In May, I wrote to all university Vice Chancellors to seek assurance that their institutions would accept the reformed Welsh Baccalaureate – Advanced Skills Challenge Certificate (WBQ) as part of their future entry requirements or as part of an alternative offer. My officials are working with universities, including the Russell Group universities, to make sure that Welsh learners taking the WBQ are not disadvantaged when it comes to entry onto HE courses.

Universities, including Oxford and Cambridge, are clear that they value the WBQ and are taking an increasingly flexible approach to recognising it in their offers. The majority of HE institutions broadly recognise the WBQ as an appropriate qualification, although some universities and courses do not count it towards their entry requirements.

## 5. Review of the WBQ

In her [written evidence to the Children, Young People and Education Committee](#) on 18 October 2017, the Cabinet Secretary said

A thematic Review by Estyn is underway to review English, Welsh, Mathematics and Mathematics – Numeracy GCSEs and the Welsh Baccalaureate. Key areas covered will be learners’ well-being, the learning experience (including looking at changes to curriculum organisation to implement the new GCSEs) and leadership and management (including processes for managing change and for tracking and monitoring learner progress).

Estyn’s [remit letter for 2017/18](#) states that the report will focus on curriculum planning and implementation of the new GCSEs in English and Welsh languages and in mathematics and numeracy, and of the new Welsh Baccalaureate. It will include a look at approaches to examination entries.

The Cabinet Secretary also stated that Qualifications Wales has commissioned an independent review of the Skills Challenge Certificate and its place within the Welsh Baccalaureate. The review will evaluate the design and assessment model of the Skills Challenge Certificate at all levels. Estyn is liaising with Qualifications Wales in the publication of their reports to help inform Estyn’s judgements when undertaking their review.

Qualifications Wales will be publishing their review in the autumn term.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.