



House of Commons
Education Committee

**The English Baccalaureate:
Government Response to
the Committee's Fifth Report**

Ninth Special Report of Session 2010–12

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The Education Committee

The Education Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Department for Education and its associated public bodies.

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Ninth Special Report

On 28 July 2011 we published our Fifth Report of this Session, *The English Baccalaureate*.¹ The response from the Government was received on 13 October 2011 and is published as an Appendix to this Report.

The Committee's recommendations are in **bold** text and the responses are in plain text.

Appendix

Government response

1. The Education Select Committee published its report on the English Baccalaureate on 28 July 2011. The report focused on the rationale, introduction and potential impact of the EBacc performance measure. The Government welcomes the Committee's report. It is a valuable contribution to discussions on how to ensure that young people are supported in taking the qualifications which will best prepare them for further study and rewarding employment.
2. The Government's rationale for the establishment of the English Baccalaureate was set out in the written evidence which it provided to the Committee. That evidence was clear that expansion of qualification options, coupled with the "equivalence" attached to different qualifications for performance measurement, had distracted some schools from offering options based on the value of the qualifications for progression to further study and work.
3. There has been a worrying decline in the offer of some core subjects in key stage 4. Pupil GCSE entries in modern foreign language (MFL), history and science GCSEs have been falling sharply in recent years. Around three quarters of pupils attempted a MFL in 2002; by 2010 this figure had dropped to just over 43 per cent. Entries have fallen again this year, with French and German down by just over 13 per cent. The number of pupils entered for history and geography GCSE is also declining.
4. The Government introduced the English Baccalaureate to halt and reverse the falls in these subjects. Through the establishment of the EBacc measure in the 2010 performance tables, we have enabled parents and pupils to see for the first time how their school is performing in these key academic subjects, and hope to encourage schools to offer a core of academic subjects and open up opportunities to all of their pupils.

1 Education Committee. Fifth Report of Session 2010-12, *The English Baccalaureate*, HC 851-I

5. Recent independent research commissioned by the Department for Education² with nearly 700 schools suggests that the EBacc is having an immediate impact: the survey indicated that 47 per cent of pupils taking GCSEs in 2013 will be doing a combination of subjects that could lead to an EBacc compared with just 22 per cent of GCSE-stage pupils entered for the EBacc in 2010. In particular, it suggests that the English Baccalaureate is reversing declines in entries to languages, history and geography, returning them to the levels of a decade ago. From September 2011, an estimated 52 per cent of pupils entering GCSEs in 2013 in the schools surveyed are expected to take a language—up nine percentage points. Approximately 33 per cent of pupils have opted to take geography—up seven percentage points and back to the level of 2002 entries. 39 per cent of pupils entering GCSEs in 2013 are expected to take history—up eight percentage points and back to the 1995 level. The analysis suggests that take up of the separate sciences is continuing to rise, with 29 per cent of Year 9 pupils in the schools surveyed opting for triple science compared to 17 per cent of pupils entering for GCSEs in 2010.
6. It shows both that EBacc subjects are being opened up to more young people and also that schools are taking a sensible approach, not entering pupils for subjects which may not suit them.
7. This document sets out the Government's response to the conclusions and recommendations made in the Committee's report. The report's conclusions and recommendations are in **bold text** and the Government's responses are in plain text. Some of the recommendations and responses have been grouped.

Recommendation 1: We acknowledge the Secretary of State's rationale for the retrospective introduction of the EBacc. However, we also recognise the tension between the lack of consultation concerning the EBacc's introduction, and the Government's aspiration to afford greater autonomy and respect to the education profession. Consultation with teachers, as well as the further and higher education sectors and employers, might have avoided a number of the concerns which are now being raised, and may have secured support for the EBacc rather than generating the mainly negative response which our inquiry has seen. In future, the Government should aim to give appropriate notice of, and undertake consultation with key stakeholders and the wider public on, any new performance or curriculum measures. (Paragraph 18)

Recommendation 10: The Secretary of State is right to recognise the distortions created by 'gaming' of the system by schools. However, our evidence shows significant resentment on the part of schools at the retrospective application of the EBacc to 2010 data, and we recommend that, in future, the Government gives

² Clemens, S. (2011). *The English Baccalaureate and GCSE Choices*. London: Department for Education.

schools sufficient warning of any change to the criteria on which their performance is to be judged by parents and the wider public. (Paragraph 74)

8. The English Baccalaureate has been established to provide simple information to parents, and others, about the current achievements of students in a core set of academic subjects which are shown to enhance pupils' chances of progressing onto further study. It is important to draw a distinction between introducing better information and introducing accountability or curriculum measures which will lead to intervention with schools, for which prior consultation is wholly appropriate.
9. The EBacc is the first step towards making available all the data that we have on school performance, to help the public to analyse and compare schools across a range of indicators. By publishing as much valuable information of this kind as possible, anyone will be able to produce their own measure by which to judge schools, according to their own interests.
10. However we agree that it is important to consult on any new future measure of accountability which could lead to Government intervention with schools. That is why we are consulting on proposals arising from recommendations in the Wolf Review of Vocational Qualifications which will affect what counts towards the accountability measure. That measure remains attainment of 5 A*-C grades at GCSE (or equivalent) including English and maths and in addition progress between key stage two and key stage four.

Recommendation 2: We welcome the recently-launched review of the National Curriculum. We hope this will lead to a considered, coherent rethinking of the curriculum allowing full consultation with, and input from the teaching profession, parents, employers, colleges and universities. We understand the Government's wish to introduce reform with all speed, but regret the launch of the EBacc before the curriculum review was completed. Any measure which examines schools' performance in particular subjects would be better introduced once the curriculum itself has been defined and finalised. (Paragraph 20)

11. We are grateful to the Committee for its endorsement of the National Curriculum review and agree on the need for proper consultation to take place around it. A statutory consultation on the proposals resulting from Phase 1 (on the design and content of the Programmes of Study for mathematics, English, science and PE) will take place in early 2012. Following this, Ministers will announce final decisions on those Programmes of Study and will set out which other subjects will form part of the new National Curriculum. Phase 2 of the review will involve a Call for Evidence on these other curriculum subjects and the development of proposals on the design and content of Programmes of Study for them. A statutory consultation on this second set of Programmes of Study will be conducted in early 2013. The new Programmes of Study will be subject to approval by Parliament.

12. The English Baccalaureate is very different in purpose from the National Curriculum review and is not necessarily affected by its decisions. The National Curriculum review will determine what subjects should be made compulsory and at what ages, along with any content that should be taught to all young people. The EBacc is not compulsory—the information was made available to help parents find out more about pupils’ achievement in key academic subjects, which we know parents themselves value and in recognition of the urgent need to halt and reverse the declining number of pupils who are taking up those subjects.

Recommendation 3: We do not believe the EBacc—the hybrid of a certificate and a performance measure, named after a qualification—is appropriately labelled: it is not a baccalaureate, and as it stands the name can therefore be misleading to parents, professionals and pupils. The Government should assess the extent to which the name might cause confusion: a concern, like some others, which consultation before the EBacc's introduction could have identified. (Paragraph 22)

13. The English Baccalaureate is giving a wider range of young people the chance to take a core of academic subjects that equip them well in progressing on to further study. We think this is a straightforward concept which is being understood by parents and professionals. The independent YouGov polls referenced in the Committee’s report (at paragraph 9) are clear that EBacc subjects are the subjects most valued by the public and we are confident that most parents support the Government’s aim of increasing the number of pupils taking up these disciplines. Wide public interest in the EBacc shows that this is an area that parents are interested in and schools are rightly responding to that. The NatCen survey referenced above (at paragraph 5) shows that schools are responding, with more pupils being offered the opportunity to take up subjects which will lead to the EBacc since the measure was established. We believe that changing the name of the EBacc at this stage would cause unnecessary confusion.
14. Schools will want to provide information about the EBacc to parents and pupils as part of the broader advice they provide on Key Stage 4 subject options. Evidence from the NatCen survey indicates that the great majority (88 per cent of schools responding) are doing so.

Recommendation 4: We support the Government's desire to have greater equality of opportunity for all students, and to improve the attainment of those eligible for free school meals. The evidence is unclear as to whether entering more disadvantaged students for EBacc subjects would necessarily make a significant contribution to this aim. Concentrating on the subjects most valued for progression to higher education could mean schools improve the attainment and prospects of their lowest-performing students, who are disproportionately the poorest as well. However, other evidence suggests that the EBacc might lead to a greater focus on those students on the borderline of achieving it, and therefore have a negative impact on the most vulnerable or disadvantaged young people, who could receive less attention as a

result. At the same time, we believe that the EBacc's level of prescription does not adequately reflect the differences of interest or ability between individual young people, and risks the very shoe-horning of pupils into inappropriate courses about which one education minister has expressed concerns. Given these concerns, it is essential that the Government confirms how it will monitor the attainment of children on free school meals in the EBacc. (Paragraph 37)

Recommendation 9: We are glad that the Department for Education has recognised the potential impact of the EBacc on teacher supply, and is working on solutions to any adverse effect this might have. However, academic subjects are not the only path to a successful future, and all young people, regardless of background, must continue to have opportunities to study the subjects in which they are likely to be most successful, and which pupils, parents and schools think will serve them best. (Paragraph 69)

Recommendation 7: As we recommended in our recent report on participation by 16-19 year olds in education and training, the Department for Education "should consider whether a 40%/60% split between time spent on specifically vocational or technical study and on core academic curriculum would best suit 14 year olds who take up vocational options while at school." However, we have not seen any evidence that the problems associated with the introduction and mission of the EBacc could be avoided if a Technical Baccalaureate were introduced along similar lines, despite the support this won from some witnesses. For these reasons, we do not recommend the creation of such a baccalaureate at this time. (Paragraph 48)

Recommendation 11: We are concerned that the EBacc is not yet part of a balanced score-card which gives equal weight to the progress of every child, focussing instead on those who have a realistic prospect of gaining the award. We would encourage the Government to press ahead with its stated intention to develop performance measures which assess the progress of all pupils, including those on free school meals, and consider that future performance measures need to be part of a coherent and cohesive strategy for school reform, rather than appearing piecemeal. We re-iterate our desire, which we believe supports the Government's, for more performance measures, amongst (rather than above) which the EBacc might sit. (Paragraph 77)

15. The Committee's report focuses helpfully on the importance of promoting greater equality of opportunity for all students; we believe strongly that schools' performance in this respect should be monitored across a range of measures and agree with the Committee that the EBacc should be one indicator of many.
16. As the Committee notes, children from poorer backgrounds are far less likely to take EBacc subjects; its report notes that only 4.1 per cent of pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) achieved the EBacc, against 17 per cent of pupils not eligible (at paragraph 23). The report also highlights evidence submitted by the Department for

Education which shows that, as the proportion of FSM pupils in a school increases the number of students either entering or achieving the EBacc drops dramatically.

17. We agree that EBacc take-up needs to be monitored to ensure that it is improving the prospects of children from poorer backgrounds—this needs to be monitored not just by Government, but also by professionals and the public—to see whether pupils eligible for FSM are being given increasing opportunities to achieve the EBacc. The Performance Tables will report on take-up rates and achievement of the EBacc and this information will enable readers to see figures for pupils from low income families (i.e. defined as those on FSM and Children Looked After) compared with those for other children.
18. The NatCen survey we have commissioned suggests that the publication of the English Baccalaureate measure has had a significant and welcome effect, and that schools are taking a sensible approach to their students' GCSE choices. The research does not suggest that schools are putting all their pupils in for the English Baccalaureate regardless of whether it is suitable. It indicates that 47 per cent of pupils taking GCSEs in 2013 will be taking subjects that could lead to an EBacc, compared with 22 per cent of GCSE-stage pupils entered for the EBacc in 2010. Schools are opening up EBacc subjects to their pupils, but many pupils are taking other subject choices. For those pupils choosing EBacc, there is space in the timetable to study other subjects in which they have an aptitude and interests, which means that they will also be doing a variety of different options. Whilst it is clear that achievement of qualifications in EBacc subjects will in general provide children with strong opportunities to progress to further study, schools and parents will be the best judge of what is most beneficial to individual pupils. If a school believes that encouraging or compelling a student to take a language—or history or geography—would be harmful to their long-term prospects, then they should not enter them for those subjects.
19. We have also been clear that every young person should have the opportunity to take excellent technical and practical courses; the Government has set out how it will support this intention in its response to Professor Wolf's Review of Vocational Education. We have no plans to introduce a Technical Baccalaureate at this time.
20. We also agree that a balance of measures is required to enable the monitoring of schools' performance for all pupils. In his evidence to the Committee, the Minister of State for Schools said that "the long-term objective of the Government is to publish as many data as possible, to create greater transparency and to enable parents and other users of those data to find out what they want to find out about the performance of schools. So this is just one measure among many that we envisage for the future".³ The 2011 Performance Tables will include a much wider

³ Transcript of oral Evidence taken before the Education Committee on Wednesday 27 April 2011.

range of performance measures than ever before; with the main focus being on pupil attainment, pupil progress and narrowing gaps. We will provide breakdowns of performance against key attainment and progress indicators (including the EBacc) by pupils in low, middle and high prior attainment groups; and also by pupils from low income families compared with others.

Recommendation 5: We agree with the Government that, if our education system is to improve, it must take account of best practice internationally. However, the evidence we received does not suggest a link, in other countries, between the prescribed study of certain academic subjects and improved attainment and prospects for poorer students. The Government should provide further such international evidence, and analysis of it, to inform debate on the merits of the EBacc. (Paragraph 38)

21. International evidence does not provide exact parallels between other systems' arrangements for encouraging take up of core academic subjects; those arrangements vary. However, it is clear that it is quite usual for high performing systems to ensure that pupils study similar key academic courses up to the age of 16.
22. So the international evidence does not run counter to evidence submitted by the Department to the Committee on the benefits of taking the EBacc subjects. It is clear that young people who study the subjects in the English Baccalaureate are much more likely to progress on to further study, compared even to those who have 5 A*-C including English and maths: 95 per cent of young people achieving the EBacc went onto study at A Level standard, in comparison to 78.5 per cent of those achieving 5 A*-C Grades including English and maths; 44 per cent of pupils achieving the EBacc achieved at least one A Grade at A Level, in comparison to 26 per cent of those achieving 5 A*-C Grades including English and maths. For pupils of higher ability there is a clear advantage to studying the EBacc combination of subjects and the measure illustrates how many pupils have been getting this opportunity.
23. We are also taking account of international evidence in the context of the National Curriculum Review, benchmarking the new curriculum against the curricula of top performing countries to ensure that we set the highest expectations for what our children should know at certain stages of their education.

Recommendation 6: Universities, further education providers and sixth form colleges have already begun to communicate their position on the EBacc, but confusion on its status remains. Information on how it might be used in applications procedures, if at all, should be made readily available to students, parents, and schools. (Paragraph 39)

24. The English Baccalaureate is not a qualification and is not intended to drive universities' application procedures. It provides information on how schools are

performing in subjects which we know lead young people to A Level study and equip them well for entry onto competitive university courses. It was already the case that pupils who studied these subjects were more likely to progress on to further study and the publication of EBacc information means that this is now known more widely.

25. The Government believes strongly in the wider principle of providing and expanding the information on individual courses that is available to prospective students; we have committed to do so, asking UCAS and higher education institutions to make available, course by course, new data showing the type and subjects of the actual qualifications held by previously successful applicants.

Recommendation 8: We acknowledge that certain academic subjects studied at A-level are more valued by Russell Group universities than others. The EBacc is founded on that university-based curriculum. However, our inquiry has uncovered significant issues with the EBacc's current composition, and there are certain subjects and qualifications where we are not clear on the rationale behind their exclusion. A focus on a fairly narrow range of subjects, demanding considerable curriculum time, is likely to have negative consequences on the uptake of other subjects. We encourage the Government to examine carefully the evidence presented to us, and suggest that it reconsiders the composition of the EBacc on conclusion of the National Curriculum Review. More importantly, future performance measures must be well thought through. (Paragraph 68)

26. We will continue to keep the composition of the English Baccalaureate under review, monitoring its impact on other subjects. The EBacc is a necessary driver for change, addressing years of decline in entries to key academic subjects such as French, German, history and geography. The NatCen survey of schools indicates that the EBacc is having an impact, increasing take up of EBacc subjects and reversing these declines, but also suggesting that schools are making decisions which best suit the individual circumstances of their pupils.
27. The Committee's report acknowledges that certain academic subjects studied at A level are more valued by the Russell Group than others and notes that these subjects are almost identical to the EBacc subjects (at paragraph 34). The composition of the EBacc also reflects that the take up of languages, history and geography are in decline, having been withdrawn from Key Stage 4 by some schools, even where pupils might benefit from them. But, as we said in our evidence to the Committee, the Government does not want schools to restrict pupils' options to just this academic core or to force these qualifications on pupils for whom they are clearly not suitable. The composition of the EBacc has been kept small to allow the opportunity for additional study including the technical, creative and other subject areas around which the report expresses concern. We believe the study of religious education is also secure—it is a compulsory subject and a popular qualification; whilst 2011 GCSE entries have seen further declines in history and geography, entries for Religious Studies increased by nearly 18 per cent.

Recommendation 12: The Government should consider the publication of unique learner numbers which would enable the analysis of entry for, and attainment in, particular subjects and combinations of subjects within a school: information such as this could allow a fuller picture to emerge of how to meet Ministers' aims. (Paragraph 78)

28. We agree that as much information which will help parents and professionals to monitor the performance of schools in depth should be made available. As part of our work toward this we will, from June 2012, open up access to anonymised data from the National Pupil Database. This will enable everyone to make better comparisons of school performance and we will look to widen and strengthen the information over time.

Recommendation 13: The Government needs either to remove or revalue qualifications appropriately within the performance tables. We therefore welcome the Government's response to the Wolf review with regard to vocational qualifications and their league table tariffs. However, we remain unconvinced that the EBacc is an effective way to redress the perverse incentives generated by existing performance measures (indeed in some ways it risks generating its own perverse incentives) and we feel that the EBacc serves as a distraction rather than a solution in this context. (Paragraph 82)

29. The Government agrees that it is vital to ensure that pupils should be taking only those qualifications that will be the most valuable for their future progress. As the Committee points out, we are currently working on identifying these qualifications and, from 2014, only vocational qualifications that meet strict new criteria will be recognised in the performance tables. These will count equally with GCSEs.

30. Extending the range of performance measures which are available will help to mitigate against the risk that any one measure is given undue focus. The EBacc is one performance measure among many that we will make available in future. These will include a new Average Grade per Entry performance measure, included in the 2011 tables, which will look across qualifications and grades attained at the end of KS4 to determine the average grade achieved.

Recommendation 14: We are concerned that an EBacc certificate might give too much emphasis to one performance measure in a balanced score-card, and for this reason suggest that plans for certification should be shelved. We have not seen any evidence, either, that the cost and logistics of certification have been fully thought through. (Paragraph 84)

31. We are grateful to the Committee for its consideration of certification of the English Baccalaureate. We are considering the options for awarding certificates and issues associated with those options, and will make a decision on how to proceed in due course.