

The Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification

Quick Guide

January 2015

Introduction

The Welsh Government is currently making considerable changes to qualifications in Wales, including to the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification (WBQ). A new version of the WBQ will be introduced for **teaching from September 2015** which the Welsh Government says will be more rigorous. This follows a recommendation from Huw Evans' **Review of Qualifications for 14 to 19 year olds in Wales** that a revised WBQ should be at the heart of Wales' new national qualifications system.

Background

The Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification (WBQ) was introduced in September 2003 on a pilot basis. It was then rolled out across a number of schools and further education (FE) colleges, and made available to all of them in Wales in September 2007.

Centres (such as schools and colleges) apply to be providers of the WBQ, a process which is administered by the WJEC as the awarding body. The number of centres teaching the WBQ and the number of pupils studying it has steadily increased since 2007.

The WBQ combines general and/or vocational education (through existing qualifications) with the development of key skills that are intended to equip young people they need after leaving school. The WJEC says 'it gives broader experiences than traditional learning programmes, to suit the diverse needs of young people'.¹

Status in the curriculum

The WBQ is not statutory for learners to undertake nor compulsory for centres to provide, although the Welsh Government strongly encourages them to do so, including providing incentives to schools and colleges.

The **FAQ section** on the Welsh Government's Qualifications Wales website includes the question 'Will the Welsh Bac be compulsory?' (referring to the new version to be taught from 2015). The Welsh Government answers:

The Welsh Bac is an exciting and challenging qualification that helps young people develop the skills they need for work and further study and gives them a recognised qualification for these skills. In line with the recommendations from the Review of Qualifications, the Welsh Government is encouraging universal adoption – i.e. all or almost all learners should take the Welsh Baccalaureate. **It is not a statutory requirement, but its use will be encouraged.** It will be incentivised through performance

¹ Welsh Baccalaureate website (WJEC), **About the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification** [accessed 23 December 2014]



measures, and supported by the post 16 funding system. [my emphasis]

Essentially, it depends on the school or college a) whether they offer the WBQ and b) if they require all of their learners to study towards it. However, where centres are approved to offer the WBQ to pupils / students, Estyn has stated it is **good practice** for them to provide this to the full cohort:

'The Welsh Baccalaureate is at its **most successful in schools where it is a compulsory element** of the curriculum. This is because these schools ensure that all students complete the qualification and do not allow students to opt out, unless there are exceptional circumstances. In addition, there is often a broader range of activities in these schools. In schools where the qualification is an option, completion rates are lower as a minority of pupils drop out. This is either because they leave before the end of the course or because they want to focus on their option subjects.' [my emphasis]²

The current qualification

The current WBQ consists of two parts:

- **Core:** consisting of five components: Essential Skills Wales/Key Skills; Wales, Europe and the World; Work-related Education; Personal and Social Education; and the Individual Investigation;
- **Options:** courses / programmes currently offered e.g. GCSE, AS / A levels, BTEC and Principal Learning.

At present, the WBQ can be taken at one of three levels: Foundation; Intermediate; and Advanced.

Candidates who meet the requirements of the Core and Options relevant to each level of the qualification, are awarded the Welsh Baccalaureate Foundation, Intermediate or Advanced Diploma as appropriate. The Advanced WBQ is the only level that is graded and this has only been graded since (courses starting) September 2013.

The Welsh Government says that the WBQ is widely recognised and accepted by higher education institutions.³ The Advanced Diploma attracts **120** Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (**UCAS**) **tariff points**, the same as an A grade in an A Level subject. (see later section on regard for WBQ from higher education)

The Welsh Baccalaureate website provides **further information on the current WBQ**, including the **specifications** for each of the three levels.

Review of 14-19 qualifications

In September 2011, the Welsh Government commissioned Huw Evans, former principal of Coleg Llandrillo, to undertake a review of qualifications available to 14 to 19 year olds in Wales. Huw Evans' report, titled **Review of Qualifications for 14 to 19 year olds in Wales**, was published in November 2012.

The review made several important recommendations about the WBQ, which were all accepted by the Welsh Government. The review recommended that 'a revised and more rigorous' WBQ should be at the heart of the new national qualifications system that the review also recommended for Wales. The review made five specific recommendations, which were essentially for:

² Estyn, **Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification provision at level 3 in secondary schools: A good practice guide**, 2012, para 40

³ Qualified for Life website (Welsh Government), **What's changing: Welsh Baccalaureate** [accessed 23 December 2014]



- A **revised and more rigorous WBQ**, available at National Foundation, National, National post-16 and Advanced levels, and **building on the strengths and concerns** over the current model;
- **Grading at Advanced level** for teaching from September 2013 and **consideration of pros and cons of grading at other levels**;
- The Welsh Government to **encourage the universal adoption of the WBQ** by schools at 14 to 16 (either National Foundation or National) and by schools and colleges at 16 to 19 (National post-16 or Advanced);
- Use of the **Unique Learner Number system to keep a central record** of each learner's cumulative attainment of elements of the Welsh Baccaalaureate programmes;
- **More effective engagement between providers and employers** to deliver elements of the WBQ such as work experience, work-related education, and skills-based or enterprise elements.

In an **oral statement on 29 January 2013**, the then Deputy Minister for Skills, Jeff Cuthbert, announced the Welsh Government was accepting all of these recommendations and that a new 'revised, more rigorous' WBQ would be introduced for teaching from September 2015. He said the new WBQ would build on the strengths and address the concerns identified by Huw Evans' review in respect of the existing WBQ. These strengths and concerns were:

Strengths

- The incorporation of the broad range of skills and experience that employers, universities and others have told the Review they want young people to possess;
- the emphasis on literacy and numeracy;
- the other skills including 'employability' skills, and enriching experiences that contribute to a broad and well-rounded education. This includes work-related education, personal and social education and community participation;
- the Individual Investigation, encouraging independent study and a range of research, thinking and communication skills;
- the flexibility of the Wales, Europe and the World element. Where this is well delivered it proves popular, innovative and exciting;
- the use of internationally recognised stand-alone qualifications in the options;
- the accommodation of academic and vocational pathways within a single model.

Concerns

- The portfolio assessment method for Essential Skills Wales and Wider Key Skills is time-consuming and inappropriate for some settings;
- there are instances of duplication of learning or assessment between options and the Core (for instance, learners taking both a GCSE and an Essential Skills Wales qualification in ICT);
- the quality of delivery of the Core varies too widely between providers;
- the current requirements for the language element allow too much variation in what is delivered;

- there is no recognition of different levels of achievement in the award received;
- a low level of understanding, especially among parents/carers, of the structure, content or purpose of the Welsh Baccalaureate.

The new qualification (to be taught from September 2015)

The Welsh Government published the **Design principles for the Welsh Baccalaureate** (applicable for courses commencing teaching from September 2015) in November 2014. This document provides useful 'all in one place' information on changes to the WBQ.

The Design principles set out the rationale, structure, aims and learning outcomes, content, assessment, grading, moderation and reporting for the new WBQ. The document also provides the framework and criteria within and against which an awarding body or awarding bodies create the detail of the specifications for the WBQ at each level. Accredited specifications must meet the requirements of the Design principles.

As at present, the new WBQ will be awarded by the WJEC. The new WBQ will be awarded at three levels:

- **Foundation** (for use at Key Stage 4 or post-16);
- **National** (for use at Key Stage 4 or post-16);
- **Advanced** (for use at post-16 only).

Foundation level will equate to Level 1 (e.g. GCSE grades D-G) of the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales; National to Level 2 (e.g. GCSE grades A*-C; and Advanced to Level 3 (eg A-level).

The specifications for each level of the new WBQ are available on the **WJEC website**.

The new WBQ comprises a core, or '**Skills Challenge Certificate**' as the specifications describe it, alongside **Supporting Qualifications**. The requirements of both the Skills Challenge Certificate and Supporting Qualifications must be met to achieve the overarching WBQ.

The Skills Challenge Certificate

The Skills Challenge Certificate consists of four components which are followed by all learners (different specification at each level):

- **Individual Project** – an independent, research-based activity that contributes 50% towards the core;
- **Enterprise and Employability Challenge**, which will develop enterprising skills and attributes and enhance employability;
- **Global Citizenship Challenge**, which will require learners to understand and respond appropriately to a global issue;
- **Community Challenge**, which will require learners to identify, develop and participate in opportunities that will benefit the local community.



Supporting qualifications

In order to acquire the **Foundation or National** level WBQ qualifications, learners must achieve:

- GCSE English Language or GCSE Welsh Language (grades A*-G for Foundation, grades A*-C for National);
- GCSE Mathematics – Numeracy (grades A*-G for Foundation, grades A*-C for National);
- A minimum of three further GCSEs (grades A*-G, grades A*-C for National). At Key Stage 4, up to two of these may be equivalent qualifications; at post-16, all may be equivalent.

In order to acquire the **Advanced** level WBQ qualification, learners must achieve:

- GCSE English Language or GCSE Welsh Language (grades A*-C);
- GCSE Mathematics – Numeracy (grades A*-C);
- Two A levels, or equivalent. This requirement must be met through the achievement of no more than three separate qualifications.

Essential and employability skills

The Design principles and specifications state the new WBQ aims to enable learners to develop and demonstrate an understanding of and proficiency in essential and employability skills. These are described as the skills that employers and next-stage educators value and which learners need for learning, work and life. As such, the new WBQ focuses on the following **seven essential and employability skills**:

- Literacy;
- Numeracy;
- Digital Literacy;
- Critical Thinking and Problem Solving;
- Planning and Organisation;
- Creativity and Innovation;
- Personal Effectiveness.

More detail on each of the above is provided in the Design principles document which also states the WBQ will:

- Enable learners to consolidate and formalise learning of skills;
- Provide a theoretical underpinning and knowledge or techniques related to skills;
- Encourage reflection, analysis and articulation of the learner's own proficiency in the skills;
- Engage learners in exploring, developing, practicing and applying the skills;
- Increase confidence and effectiveness in the use and application of the skills in a range of meaningful and 'real-life' contexts and purposes.

Grading

Pages 14-15 of the Design principles set out the arrangements for grading of the new WBQ. Learners who began studying for the Advanced level of the WBQ in September 2013 will be the first to have their qualifications graded in August 2015.

Learners studying towards the Foundation and National levels of the new WBQ from September 2015 will also have their qualification graded.

The following overall grades will be awarded for the WBQ:

- Foundation: Pass* and Pass;
- National: A*, A, B and C;
- Advanced: A*, A, B, C, D and E.

Candidates who achieve the requirements of the Challenges and the Individual Project but fail to attain the required supporting qualifications will be awarded the Skills Challenge Certificate at the appropriate level.

The overall grade of the WBQ will depend on the total mark given to the core (Skills Challenge Certificate) which itself will be based on the results of the Individual Project and each Challenge. As stated above, this is also **subject to candidates satisfying the requirements of the supporting qualifications**, although the grades of these will not impact on the overall grade given for the WBQ.

The Challenges and Individual Project will be graded as follows:

- Foundation and National levels: Foundation Pass, Pass, Merit, Distinction;
- Advanced level: Pass, Merit, Distinction.

Regard for the WBQ from higher education and employers

The Core of the **current Advanced** Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification (WBQ) has a **value of 120 points** in the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) tariff for admissions, when completed as part of the Welsh Baccalaureate Advanced Diploma.⁴ 120 points is equivalent to an A grade at A level. In 2009, an Expert Group working to and at the request of UCAS reviewed the points allocation and concluded in its report⁵ that the value of the WBQ Advanced Core should remain at 120 UCAS tariff points. This recommendation was subsequently endorsed by the UCAS Board.

The report also states that some of the Expert Group believed its value should be increased to 140 points although following discussion, the final decision was to recommend it remained at its current level.

The Welsh Government expects that the new WBQ qualification will be still be positively regarded by higher education institutions (HEIs) and that it will attract a similar amount of UCAS points. Furthermore, it believes that the introduction of grading at Advanced level strengthens the position for university entry from September 2015,

⁴ The award of the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification Advanced Diploma requires successful completion of the Core at Advanced level and the achievement of 2 GCE A-levels, or equivalent. The WBQ Core, on its own, is not a recognised qualification and UCAS tariff points are only awarded when students achieve the Advanced Diploma.

⁵ UCAS, **Expert group report for review of award in the UCAS tariff: WJEC, Welsh Baccalaureate Advanced Diploma Qualification (Core)**, October 2009



helping admissions tutors to make appropriate offers.

On the **WBQ website**, provided by the qualification's awarding body WJEC, the value placed on the Advanced Core by UCAS is described as 'formal recognition that the experiences and skills gained are of value for studies at degree level and beyond'. The WJEC also say that:

The Welsh Baccalaureate has been welcomed by the majority of institutions, with many making a formal statement in their prospectuses and on their websites about the qualification.

WISERD Report, March 2013

Despite the UCAS tariff value explained above, it appears **not all HEIs treat the WBQ as equivalent to an A-level** in practice in the way they make conditional offers to prospective students. This is also sometimes the case within a single HEI with different academic schools and courses adopting different approaches to the value of the WBQ.

This was highlighted in a report produced for the Welsh Government by the Cardiff University based Wales Institute of Social Economic Research Data Methods (WISERD), entitled '**Relationships between the Welsh Baccalaureate Advanced Diploma and Higher Education**'. WISERD's report discussed the differing benefits to students of the WBQ depending on **whether universities make offers in terms of UCAS points or in terms of subjects and grades**.

It was clear amongst students that for entry to universities that generally made offers in terms of UCAS Tariff the WBQ was likely to be beneficial. But if universities made their offers in terms of grades (and/or subjects) its benefit was less certain.⁶

WISERD reported WBQ Coordinators as being very explicit about the **lack of consistency or clarity in how the WBQ was regarded for university admissions**, with one quoted as saying

'different universities are offering different things [...] the biggest thing we can do is give [students] the advice that it might not be an A'.

According to another WBQ co-ordinator:

'within the same university they can look at two courses – one will offer [the WBQ], one will not, which could disadvantage [students]'.⁷

WISERD found, however, from the quantitative analyses it carried out that, despite the apparent variations in the way the HE sector in the UK viewed the WBQ, there was **little evidence that this was disadvantaging Welsh students**. Indeed, it reported that university students with the WBQ were **more likely to attend a Russell Group university** than students without the WBQ, all other things being equal.⁸

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

⁶ WISERD, **Relationships between the Welsh Baccalaureate Advanced Diploma and Higher Education**, para 4.18, 2013

⁷ **Ibid**, para 4.20

⁸ **Ibid**, para 4.22

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.

Further information

For further information about the **The Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification**, please contact **Michael Dauncey** (michael.dauncey@assembly.wales), Research Service.

See also:

- Welsh Government, **Design principles for the Welsh Baccalaureate**, November 2014
- WJEC, **Welsh Baccalaureate from September 2015** (new specifications etc.)

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Michael Dauncey



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