

*Policy-making in Practice: Issues Arising from
Evaluation of the Welsh Baccalaureate*

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ABSTRACT

In 2001 the National Assembly of Wales agreed to run a six-year pilot of the 16–18 Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification, based on a model of compulsory core plus options, with 31 schools and colleges across Wales participating in three phased cohorts. The Welsh Baccalaureate has been developed by the Welsh Joint Education Committee (WJEC), with the University of Bath responsible for internal evaluation throughout. This article by the internal evaluators discusses a number of issues arising from the pilot phase, with particular emphasis on issues likely to be of relevance after rollout in September 2007. Following consideration of the background and context to development of the new qualification, the article discusses issues relating to the nature of the evaluation, acceptability of the new qualification by a number of different stakeholders, marketing and promotion, and management and organization within schools and colleges. Also considered are issues relating to staff training and support, funding, and a number of curricular challenges including the role of key skills as a central part of the compulsory core, student support, and student attainment and progression. The article closes by discussing implications of the issues arising for policy-making more broadly.

Introduction

The pilot phase of the Welsh Baccalaureate was designed to run from summer 2001 to summer 2007, with three cohorts of participating centres

Mary Hayden and Jeff Thompson 85

(schools and colleges) to have one year of planning and preparation prior to offering Intermediate and Advanced level courses to students over a two-year period. 18 centres were included in the first cohort, with a further 6 and 7 joining in cohorts 2 and 3 respectively. During 2005/06, approval was given for the development of a Foundation level to be piloted for three years with effect from September 2006. Also in September 2006, the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning announced that the Intermediate and Advanced levels would be 'rolled out' on a staged basis from September 2007.

The Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification's (WBQ's) gestation period was, however, considerably longer, with the seeds of its emergence arguably sown in the discontent shared by many with the narrowness of the 'A' level system, and subsequent frustration as numerous reviews since the 1970s led to recommendations for reform that failed to see the light of day. The first proposal for a Welsh Baccalaureate was made in 1993 by the Institute of Welsh Affairs (IWA, 1993), proposing a model heavily influenced by the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma programme (IBO, 2006). That IWA model was to be available at Foundation, Intermediate and Advanced levels, offering 'academic' as well as 'vocational' routes to unit completion, with one major difference between this model and the IB Diploma being that the vocational dimension is not found in the latter. An overview of the IWA-proposed model can be found in David and Jenkins (2003: 99).

The subsequent September 2000 commitment of the Welsh Assembly to pilot a Welsh Baccalaureate led to tenders for development and administration being invited from Awarding Bodies in January 2001, with the successful tender submitted by the Welsh Joint Education Committee (WJEC). Key differences between the WJEC model and what had been proposed by the IWA were its basis in existing qualifications, including A levels and vocational courses, and a 'core' to include a specially-designed course entitled 'Wales, Europe and the World'. The award of the pilot contract to the WJEC in summer 2001, and the subsequent April 2002 approval by ACCAC of the WJEC's model, effectively put an end to the IWA's hopes of their own Welsh Baccalaureate proposal being adopted and piloted across Wales.

The WJEC proposal included collaboration with Fforwm (representing the further education sector in Wales), as well as a formative, internal evaluation component to run throughout the project. The proposed internal evaluators were the Department of Education at the University of Bath, who could bring not only experience in evaluation, but also a certain level of distance from across the Severn Bridge, a link to the higher education sector

Policy-making in Practice: Issues Arising from Evaluation of the Welsh Baccalaureate

(one of the crucial groups of stakeholders to be persuaded of the currency of the new qualification) and direct experience of the IB Diploma through the authors of this article, who have subsequently been centrally involved in WBQ developments.

The development process

The notion of a Welsh Baccalaureate was central both to the National Assembly's landmark 'paving document', *The Learning Country* (National Assembly of Wales, 2001), its first major strategic policy statement on education, and to the consultation paper on 14–19 provision published the following year, *Learning Country: Learning Pathways 14–19* (WAG, 2002). As one of the distinctly non-English dimensions of the new strategy, the Welsh Baccalaureate 'signal(led) a peculiarly Welsh policy in the crucial stage of 14–19 education currently baffling the policy-makers in England' (Jones and Roderick, 2003: 225). The model proposed by the WJEC was based on the specification provided by the Assembly, the objectives of which can be summarized as follows.

- Develop a curriculum and qualification through the medium of both English and Welsh that will meet the needs of a wide range of students in Wales, promoting access and inclusion through a broad and attractive programme that gives parity to academic and vocational routes.
- Cover appropriately the distinct and diverse culture and heritage of Wales, as well as the broader international dimension, safeguarding the interests of students involved in the pilot.
- Pilot the qualification to ensure that it is manageable, workable and cost effective, providing appropriate training for centres with respect to technical and marketing aspects, project management and funding.
- Enable effective evaluation and consideration of the objectives throughout the pilot and prior to possible rollout.

One of the earliest pilot developments was the establishment of a Project Team within the WJEC, including the Head of the WJEC Research Unit, experienced colleagues from WJEC administrative, curricular and assessment functions, and a representative from Fforwm. A Project Director and Project Manager were appointed, and other early developments included the organization of regular Project Team meetings, the creation of a number of

specialist working groups and, by the National Assembly, the establishment of a Contract Monitoring Group to which the Project Team would report. Chaired by an Assembly official, this group had representation from organizations with a direct interest in the developments: ACCAC, ELWa, Business Wales, Higher Education Wales and Estyn. An overview of the curriculum model developed early in the project, as well as further details of early developments, can be found in Adams (2003: 104–16).

As might be expected during a six-year pilot, a number of issues have arisen in relation both to evaluation and to developments more generally, and the current Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification (WBQ) model is a modified version of the original (WBQ, 2006). These will be discussed in what follows, focusing on two main contextual issues as well as on more specific aspects arising from implementation of the pilot, before going on to discuss implications for policy-making.

The Welsh Context

Much research has been undertaken by researchers worldwide about so-called education ‘policy transfer’ or ‘policy borrowing’ between countries (see, for example, Steiner-Khamsi, 2004), who are at pains to point out the influence of different contexts (economic, political, cultural, geographical) which may contribute to success in one country and not in another. Policy development in Welsh Baccalaureate terms is in some senses a reversal of the more usual policy transfer pattern: moving from a situation where policy was arguably ‘imposed’ (Phillips, 2007) prior to devolution, to one where previously imposed policy could be rejected or modified as deemed appropriate to the Welsh context. In the case of the Welsh Baccalaureate, differences between the Welsh and English contexts have been clear at various stages, not least in the refreshing recognition that development of new policy requires extensive trialling and evaluation over an appropriate period of time.

Jones and Roderick (2003: 222) remark that ‘Wales benefits from its small size in that education professionals tend to know many in their own field, whether subject specialists, directors of education or the inspectorate. Interaction between these groups is therefore facilitated’. This ‘closeness’ of professionals undoubtedly oiled the formal wheels of bureaucracy in the context of this project. Accessibility of senior policy-makers, and the fact that the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning has participated in

Policy-making in Practice: Issues Arising from Evaluation of the Welsh Baccalaureate

Welsh Baccalaureate parents' evenings, launches, higher education information days and other sessions on a continuing basis during the period of the trial programme, has certainly been advantageous. Nor should the stability of ministerial support – of one, enthusiastic and supportive, Minister being in office throughout the duration of the pilot – be underestimated in respect of its influence on the profile and image of the Welsh Baccalaureate during its development stages.

The evaluation

From the outset it was agreed that the internal evaluation should have a formative emphasis, based on an essentially illuminative model structured around the three stages of observation, enquiring further and seeking to explain, with a view to contributing to decision-making (Parlett and Hamilton, 1972; Hamilton et al., 1977). The internal evaluation was to feed into ongoing developments, gathering and analysing data in order to inform and advise the work of the WJEC Welsh Baccalaureate Project Team and thus influencing the implementation of policy. 'An 'internal' evaluation study', says Hopkins (1989: 18) 'is more likely to be formative than summative, more likely to be descriptive than judgemental' and this was true of the approach taken by the WBQ internal evaluators. An internal evaluation team was established at the University of Bath, with overall direction from one of the authors (Hayden) and input from a number of colleagues, including a Welsh speaker. From the beginning it was envisaged that, at some stage during the pilot, the Assembly would invite tenders for an external evaluation and that the internal evaluators would thus not only report to the Project Team and Assembly, but would also in due course share the data gathered with the external evaluators.

A first strategy paper prepared by the internal evaluators in September 2001 for discussion with the Project Team, and thence the Assembly's Contract Monitoring Group, outlined an overall plan for the six-year evaluation. A quantitative, statistically-based, matched experimental and control group approach to evaluation (see, for example, Hopkins, 1989) was deemed not to be appropriate, given the nature of the pilot and resources available. Rather, the internal evaluation would be more qualitative in approach, gathering data through regular contact with a wide range of stakeholders (students, teachers, administrators, employers, higher education personnel, past students now in higher education), attendance at meetings

and conferences, face-to-face interviews, questionnaires and centre visits. In addition, the internal evaluators agreed to take on the organization and chairing of a WBQ Higher Education Advisory Team (HEAT), made up principally of admissions staff from a number of Welsh and English universities, who would meet regularly to offer advice on dissemination of information within this sector. The Project Team later set up an Employers Advisory Group for a similar purpose.

As envisaged, later in the pilot the Assembly invited tenders for external evaluation and in 2005 the University of Nottingham's Centre for Developing and Evaluating Lifelong Learning were appointed external evaluators; all internal evaluation reports were made available to them. The external evaluators submitted their final report in July 2006, based on their own data gathering but also drawing upon, and acknowledging, significant input from the internal evaluation.

Throughout the six-year period, the Project Team and Internal Evaluation team established close relationships with pilot centres. From an evaluative standpoint, this permitted continuing checks on the validity of the internal evaluation outcomes, sometimes through specially-convened 'evaluation conferences' involving all centres and often through discussions between internal evaluators and teachers and administrators in centre visits.

Issues arising from the evaluation

Full details of the external evaluators' findings can be found via the Welsh Assembly Government website (WAG, 2006), while eight themed reports produced by the internal evaluators in June 2006 are available via the University of Bath website (University of Bath, 2006). These sources inform the following brief discussion of issues arising from the evaluation.

Acceptability of the qualification

In addition to parents and students, two major groups of WBQ stakeholders are employers and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), not only in Wales but also within the rest of the UK. While some strides have been made in convincing these groups of the value of the new qualification, there remains considerably more work to be done. Some early indications are that the combination of core plus options might be more valued by employers requiring 'soft skills' (in, for example, the retail sector) than by those

Policy-making in Practice: Issues Arising from Evaluation of the Welsh Baccalaureate

requiring more 'technical' skills (in, for example, industry). For the Advanced level qualification to have credibility, higher education (HE) recognition is crucial. Diversity within the HE sector has led to differences in formal recognition to date, though the response from most HEIs, including all HEIs in Wales, has been positive. The decision by UCAS to attribute 120 tariff points to the core, within a successfully completed WBQ (UCAS, 2007), has undoubtedly been helpful in this respect. Differences in HE responses relate to factors including whether they use the UCAS tariff point system and whether they are 'recruiting' or 'selecting' universities. One challenge has been in convincing departmental admissions tutors (in addition to admissions staff centrally) of the value of the WBQ, and there have been some cases of offers made which effectively ignore the WBQ (with a potential consequence that the student then drops the WBQ core studies during the second year of the WBQ in order to concentrate on A level subjects). Progress continues to be made, however, and HE information conferences organized in conjunction with the Key Skills Support team in 2004, 2005 and 2007 have been helpful in this respect.

Reactions of parents have been mixed. Some have welcomed the WBQ's promotion of Welsh issues, giving credit for activities (such as work-related education) previously not credited. Others have resisted the notion of additional workload because of the perceived risk of a negative impact on A level achievement. Attitudes of students have also been mixed, with one concern amongst some being its compulsory nature in their centre (a decision left to each individual school and college). Notable has been the widespread support shown for work-related education by students, apparently irrespective of their choice of academic or vocational options. Responses overall suggest that no element of the WBQ core is inherently unachievable or incapable of interesting students given an appropriate delivery structure.

Marketing and promotion

Central to the issue of acceptability is that of marketing and promotion. In the early days of the pilot, there was evidence of confusion of the WBQ with the IWA's original proposal and, on occasion, with the IB Diploma already offered in a number of colleges in Wales. In addition there were some inaccurate assumptions that all study had to be through the medium of Welsh. Considerable progress has been made during the pilot phase: by participating centres, by the Assembly and, undoubtedly, through the Project

Team's development of materials, links with centres and individual commitment to the pilot project. Colleges generally found it more difficult to market the WBQ to potential students than did schools, which are able to begin the process at an earlier age. Some centres feel that more could have been initiated in the way of national publicity campaigns by the Assembly and by the WJEC, although it has also been argued that promotion of any programme needs to be relatively constrained during a pilot phase. Nevertheless, understanding of the WBQ has clearly grown during the pilot, not least because of the media attention – albeit not always well-informed – received along the way.

Management and organization

Supportive input from senior management within pilot centres has, not surprisingly, been crucial in securing the success of the WBQ, through growth strategies in development planning as well as involvement in strategic planning and delivery. A requirement of the pilot was that each centre identified a WBQ Coordinator, a role in some cases divided between a senior manager (assuming a strategic coordination role) and another individual taking an operational role. Deployment of the role has also varied between schools and colleges (where the multi-site nature of some colleges has proved challenging), and through some centres appointing an administrative assistant to support the WBQ Coordinator. Kanter (1984) argued that a major characteristic of organizations most effective in implementing change is a holistic approach as opposed to a departmentally segmented vision, a view supported by the experience of this project. Important to success has been familiarity with, and ownership of, the WBQ by staff across a centre and not only by those directly involved in its implementation. Where the WBQ Coordinator has essentially been a 'one-man band' and relatively isolated, problems have resulted through lack of ownership across colleagues while, conversely, the benefits of regular meetings of team members responsible for delivery of the WBQ have been evident.

Curricular challenges

A major challenge to the Project Team has been the provision of a coherent and comprehensive programme of study which avoids over-prescription but identifies the sequence of topics and frames tasks to ensure students encounter a range of learning styles with an appropriate degree of student

choice and responsibility. Flexibility for centres, for instance, allowed them to decide whether or not to make participation compulsory and, while most schools made it a requirement of study in Years 12 and 13, many colleges made it a requirement of particular courses. *De facto*, therefore, for most students WBQ study was compulsory if they wished to attend a particular school or follow a particular course at a local college. Some resented this lack of choice. Key to successful implementation of the WBQ in a centre has been its compatibility with the culture of that centre, with the most confident centres those where the WBQ was not seen as an isolated curriculum innovation. Delivery of the WBQ has also been enhanced in many centres by effective partnerships with external agencies.

Key skills

Key skills are a crucial component of the WBQ core and since many centres, especially schools, had had minimal previous experience of successful key skills teaching and assessment, key skills delivery became one of the biggest challenges faced in offering the WBQ. As with options, there is no requirement that key skills be completed through the WJEC, and students at a number of centres have completed key skills qualifications offered by other Awarding Bodies including Edexcel, AQA and OCR. WBQ-focused staff training in key skills has thus been needed not only from the WJEC but also from the other Awarding Bodies, with whom the WJEC negotiated provision of appropriate courses.

The 2004/05 removal of testing from key skills assessment in Wales has made the WBQ more accessible, as has the reduction, part way through the pilot, of the requirement that all students should gain evidence of all six key skills. Timing of completion of key skills has been important, with earlier completion of key skills tending to be associated with success by allowing for later concentration on options.

Notable in the pilot has been the key skills success of substantial numbers of Intermediate students who, on the basis of prior achievement and tutors' comments, might not have been expected to achieve so well had they not been participating in the WBQ. This has apparently been the case even when students were not successful in completing the overall Diploma, and raises the issue of how success is defined – in terms only of qualifications, or more broadly in terms of 'value-added' to the student experience.

Student attainment and progression

There is also much anecdotal evidence to suggest that many students have benefited from WBQ participation in respect of attributes such as growing self-confidence, independent study skills, and understanding of current affairs which do not necessarily translate directly into successful award of the WBQ Diploma. Though longitudinal tracking is needed before any firm conclusions can be drawn with respect to preparation for higher education, many participating staff and students anticipate that the development of independent study skills and communication skills will be helpful in further studies, and believe that wider benefits include increased sense of responsibility and improved understanding of Welsh issues. In terms of successful completion of the WBQ Diploma, results from the second full two-year cycle (summer 2006) were notably improved on the first (summer 2005), reinforcing the view that later cohorts have learned from the experiences of the first.

No evidence, other than anecdotal, has emerged as yet to formulate conclusions relating to either progression or retention. One notable issue, however, relates to the measurement of drop-out, which some media coverage around the summer 2005 issue of results interpreted by comparing successful completion numbers with numbers who embarked on the programme two years previously. Difficulties with this interpretation include the fact that no comparable data exist for non-WBQ students, and that a number of centres have included whole year groups in the WBQ programme for the enrichment provided, without expecting that all will successfully complete the qualification.

Student support

In the first pilot year a lack of clarity about the amount of work required, external recognition, what form the programme would take and the independent learning ethos of the WBQ made it difficult for tutors to ensure students were well-informed, although this situation improved with experience. The Personal Tutorial, emphasized as a central dimension of the WBQ model, has proved challenging to some centres, with confusion arising between personal and group tutorials. In some cases appropriate time slots were not timetabled, so that meetings were only possible during staff and student free time, while for centres with an existing strong pastoral emphasis the personal tutorial was accommodated easily. Which members of staff took on the role of personal tutor varied from centre to centre, given the range of skills required for a role involving familiarity with both the curriculum and

Policy-making in Practice: Issues Arising from Evaluation of the Welsh Baccalaureate

pastoral dimensions and generally focusing on setting personal targets, time management, self-preparation for examinations, and students taking responsibility for their own learning.

Mapping (of the unique individual route each student would follow to encounter identified targets) and tracking proved a challenge in recording intention and achievement. Support by teachers/tutors has varied, with challenges evident in ensuring that not only staff with a particular role in WBQ core delivery, but also teachers of all the options that might possibly be taken, 'buy into' the WBQ and provide support for students in, for example, identifying opportunities for key skills in their subject areas.

Staff training and support

The main source of training and support from the outset has been the Project Team, whose work has generally been widely appreciated by centres, with courses (offered regionally) being seen as relevant and informative. Attendance at training courses has, however, been variable and centres have not always sent the most appropriate staff for the courses in question. Support and training was also provided by Careers Wales, Dysg and the Key Skills Support Programme. Additionally, as the pilot progressed the more well-established Cohort 1 centres were often approached for advice and support by their less experienced peers, with some organizing open days. An issue here, as with other 'ad hoc' support groups of centres that emerged, was the difficulty of ensuring that all information disseminated was well-informed if there was no involvement from the Project Team. Conferences for all centres organized by both the Project Team and the internal evaluation team were well received, not only fulfilling their specific objectives but also providing opportunities for networking and feeding back on progress.

Training *within* centres was variable in quantity and quality. Some centres organized whole staff training days to ensure that the aims of the WBQ were understood by all, while others focused only on staff delivering the WBQ. Centres that organized regular meetings of WBQ staff found such meetings provided valuable training opportunities for newly-involved WBQ staff to learn from the more experienced. To be fully effective, training opportunities had to be planned throughout the year before delivery began; some centres did not appear to use the one year planning time to the full and were thus not well prepared when students enrolled. Assumptions made at the outset about the effectiveness of a 'cascade' model, whereby colleagues attending Project Team training days would disseminate information internally to their

colleagues, turned out to have been optimistic. Pilot experiences echoed HMI's critique of the use of a 'cascade' approach in the early days of GCSE training, which pointed out the necessity of clear training objectives for those charged with cascading within school, careful selection of within-school trainers, and training for them in the running of dissemination activities (HMI, 1988, in Craft, 1996).

Funding

Additional funding was provided to support WBQ delivery, including examination fees and cover to allow staff to attend training days. Some complained that the funding provided was insufficient and it is also possible that the mechanism for funding transfer, based in part on numbers participating from the outset, may have encouraged some centres to maximize numbers at the beginning of the two-year course and thus exacerbated the difficulties, noted above, of measuring drop-out rates accurately.

Implications for policy-making

From the many issues arising during the pilot, a number of implications arise for policy-making more generally, as follows.

Consultation

An undoubted strength of the WBQ pilot has been the consultation processes built in from the outset, which have been widespread throughout its development. The curriculum model was informed in its early stages by consultative groups from a variety of backgrounds, including input from 16–19 specialists in London (Ken Spours) and research into the nature of baccalaureate models (Thompson, Hayden and Cambridge, 2003). Employers, higher education institutions, parents, students and Local Education Authorities, as well as Assembly Members, ACCAC, ELWa, Dysg and Estyn, have all had opportunities for input in different ways, and modifications to the model have also been made in response to feedback from pilot schools and colleges.

Evaluation style/methodology

A strength of the internal evaluation model has been its ability to influence developments through input of feedback from a range of stakeholders, as

Policy-making in Practice: Issues Arising from Evaluation of the Welsh Baccalaureate

well as to cope with 'the changes and uncertainties of intervening in real-life settings' (Rossi and Freeman, 1993). It has also been a strength that the evaluation could cope with mid-stream changes, changes in participation and poor retention and high attribution rates (which jeopardize any statistical analyses), as discussed by Goodstadt (1990) in relation to evaluation projects more generally. A possible limitation has been the difficulty of internal evaluators retaining, over a six-year period, the objectivity they had at the outset. The inclusion of the one-year external evaluation has no doubt been helpful in this respect, although it raises interesting issues as to how two overlapping sets of evaluators should operate in order to avoid duplication and ensure maximum validity: by collaboration and sharing of data (as happened here) or by keeping an arm's length distance.

On the experience of this pilot it is suggested that effective formative evaluation is likely to include the following characteristics:

- Continuous feedback from the evaluators.
- Directed feedback, with a clear sense of the requirements of the recipient(s).
- Evidence-based advice.
- Multi-method data collection, to incorporate input from a range of sources.
- Collaboration/partnership in data collection with relevant stakeholders.
- Consultation (as, in this case, with the Project Team, Higher Education Advisory Team, Evaluation Advisory Group and Contract Monitoring Group).
- Reappraisal of evaluation objectives in the light of progress.

While the unusual duration of this project highlighted the importance of the last point in particular, any formative evaluation would seem likely to benefit from including such characteristics as appropriate to the context.

The wider context

In many respects Wales is leading the way in 14–19 developments and it is undoubtedly the case that WBQ progress has been watched with interest from London, as well as elsewhere. The ill-fated Tomlinson Committee recommendations (DfES, 2004) took note of WBQ developments, and the Specialised Diplomas currently under development in England are likely to be informed by lessons learned with respect to the award of an overarching

diploma with components completed through more than one awarding body. Now that 'rollout' has been agreed, one question already asked, but yet to be answered, is whether the WBQ can be offered outside the context of Wales, with appropriate customization of the core Wales, Europe and the World component. Should this prove possible, there may well be interest from schools and colleges in England, if not more widely.

The Welsh context was noted earlier as an important factor in this development, and it is undoubtedly the case that the 'Welshness' of the WBQ has been one of its attractions for a number of schools and colleges. That said, 'Welsh identity' is clearly experienced differently in different parts of Wales, with more enthusiasm felt for the Welsh dimensions of the programme by some students than by others. No curriculum development will satisfy all stakeholders completely, particularly if – as in the case of the Welsh Baccalaureate – it is attempting to cater for the entire year group irrespective of background, achievements and interests. The addition of the Foundation level to complement the Intermediate and Advanced levels brings the possibility of full inclusion a step nearer, as well as presenting new challenges in its development for both pre-16 and post-16 curricular implementation. On the basis of progress to date, there is evidence to suggest that the Welsh Baccalaureate, given continued political support, has every chance of becoming established as a model from which other educational policy developers will have much to learn.

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Policy-making in Practice: Issues Arising from Evaluation of the Welsh Baccalaureate

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