The effects of the English Baccalaureate: A Research Study

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Summary

The Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove has recently launched Reforming Key Stage 4 Qualifications which proposes that English Baccalaureate Certificates will replace GCSEs from 2015 onwards. This briefing considers a recently published DfE research report considering The Effects of the English Baccalaureate (as it currently stands) from its inception in 2010. It also briefly surveys press comments and focuses on issues that may be relevant as local authorities and schools consider responding to the Key Stage 4 consultation. See Related Briefings for the CSN briefing on this DfE consultation. Consultation closes on 10 December 2012.

Background & Context

Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Education, first announced the English Baccalaureate (referred to as EBacc by the DfE and throughout this briefing) in September 2010. Further details were published in the Schools White Paper The Importance of Teaching in November 2010 and performance tables for 2010 (published in January 2011) included an English Baccalaureate measure applied retrospectively.

A previous CSN briefing, The English Baccalaureate, looked at a report from the House of Commons Education Committee, and DfE commissioned research on the English baccalaureate and GCSE choices. The English Baccalaureate also needs to be considered in the light of the Review of Vocational Education led by Professor Alison Wolf. This new measure was introduced at the same time as performance table equivalencies of vocational awards were reviewed and the Contextual Value Added (CVA) measure dropped.

The EBacc performance measure records the percentage of a school’s Year 11 cohort that achieves GCSE passes (at grades A*–C) in English, mathematics, at least two sciences, history or geography, and a modern or classical language. Fischer Family Trust evidence showed that the number of students entered for this combination of subjects had been declining. The major reason for this is a decline in foreign language entries the study of which became optional in 2004.

Michael Gove announced on 17 September 2012 the introduction of new ‘English Baccalaureate Certificates’ in the core EBacc subjects from 2015 onwards, and the intention to replace the entire suite of GCSE with a new suite of qualifications, beyond these subjects. The consultation on
Reform of Key Stage 4 Qualifications has ushered in further debate about the structure and purpose of key stage 4 learning.

Briefing in full

Research Objectives and Methodology

The Effects of the English Baccalaureate was published in October 2012 and combines a statistical review of examination take up and qualititative work undertaken with schools, pupils and parents/carers. The research objectives were to establish levels of EBacc take-up among pupils in Year 9, assess what effect the introduction of EBacc’s has had on schools, pupils and parents/carers. It aimed to do this by gathering perceptions of EBacc from schools, parents/carers and pupils and collating evidence on the emerging impacts on pupil GCSE subject choice and post-16 destinations.

The quantitative sample was drawn from a selection of different schools serving different pupil populations, and was conducted through a mixture of online forms and a telephone survey. The qualitative work aimed to cover a range of types of school. Methods used with teachers were face to face in depth interviews and in depth telephone interviews. Face to face focus groups were held with pupils with school selected samples of those engaged in EBacc subjects and those not studying the EBacc range of subjects. Qualitative, in-depth telephone interviews were held with parents/carers.

Take Up of EBacc

49% of year 9 students of surveyed students in 2012 chose to take a selection of subjects that could also lead them to achieve the EBacc standard, compared to 46% in 2011. This is a slight rise, but is not statistically significant. This slight increase in take up of an EBacc combination is also mirrored in the take up of individual EBacc subjects. Again, the report finds that this is not significant, although for languages in particular this is a reversal of a previously declining trend.

The report does point out there is a major gap in take up when the type of school is considered. In selective schools, and those with low proportions of free school meal, pupil take up of EBacc is significantly higher than in non-selective schools or those with high proportions of free school meals. This wide gap is replicated at individual subject level, and is particularly strongly for triple science and languages.

The qualitative research raised some further issues. Many teachers are still querying the exclusion of RE, and the report suggests that this could be having an effect on take up of EBacc overall. The report found that for many pupils in schools with high proportions of free school meals, languages are a ‘sticking point’. The report suggests this could be linked to a culture of low expectations, and points out that take up of languages by more academic pupils in these schools is still low. Some schools are now developing strategies to promote languages.

The report suggests that the 98% of schools now offer their pupils the choice of subjects which allow the EBacc to be achieved. The report points out that double or triple science is compulsory
for at least some pupils in 80% of schools. However, within this there is a statistically significant
drop in the proportion of schools saying double science is compulsory for all students, possibly
indicating greater flexibility within schools where it may now only be compulsory for some. Schools
that do not offer EBacc for all students almost invariably give academic ability as the reason for
retaining other combinations of awards.

The Effects of the Introduction of EBacc on Schools

The report points out that almost half of schools made significant changes to their option blocks in
2011/12 as a result of the introduction of EBacc. However this has now dropped significantly with
only 27% reporting courses withdrawn or dropped as a result of EBacc for 2012/13. The most
commonly withdrawn subjects were drama and performing arts, which had been dropped in nearly
a quarter of schools where a subject had been withdrawn (23%), followed by art (17%) and design
technology (14%). BTECs have also seen a decline (dropped in 20% schools where subjects have
been withdrawn). There has also been a reduction in early entries with teachers’ expecting further
reductions next year.

Almost a third of teachers involved indicated that EBacc had led to staffing changes in their school
with 20% expecting further changes next year. Qualitative work also indicated teachers covering
more than one subject were likely to have found the proportion of time spent on the EBacc
subjects increasing.

The qualitative work suggested there are three models of school:

a) Schools already taking a similar academic approach for whom EBacc represented little or
   no change comprised just over half the sample. Teacher’s in these schools were not
   promoting EBacc but still noted a decline in take up of technology, and an increase in
   languages. Parents and pupils in these schools appeared to value EBacc more than their
   teachers.

b) More than 20% of schools are simply adjusting their option blocks to facilitate take up of
   EBacc subjects

c) A third group of schools that were targeting EBacc, usually as an option for their higher
   attaining pupils. This could be through direction, some elements of compulsion or the use of
   different pathways for different ability levels. These schools tended to have lower levels of
   aspiration amongst pupils and parent/carers, but provided more information on EBacc for
   parents than group a schools.

Awareness and Understanding of EBacc

The vast majority of schools provide some form of advice and guidance through option choice
material, parents events, careers discussions etc. Teachers in schools where the EBacc reflects
existing practice tended to downplay the EBacc, as most of their pupils naturally selected
academic subjects, and these schools were more likely to have told their pupils EBacc is optional.
Schools with a lower take up of EBacc were more likely to be providing information for parents,
and to be encouraging at least the more able pupils to take it up.
The main factor taken into account when students choose options remains what they enjoy and are good at and what will help with any career path they have in mind. EBacc subjects are seen as inherently valuable themselves and the fact they are part of EBacc is still a secondary consideration although it does appear to have had a direct impact on take up of languages, and may have encouraged parents and pupils to value these more highly. Parents for example, when intervening in choices would usually be encouraging or instructing their children to take languages.

The variety of messages given by schools in relation to EBacc was described in the report as confusion about its worth. Some schools noted its importance for university entrance, whilst others said it did not matter. Schools were also uncertain as to whether this was simply another school performance measure, or of more significance, for the individual pupil, and this also affected the messages they gave pupils and parents/carers. Some schools expressed uncertainty about how long it was likely to be a measure, and as a result, some suggested that the percentage of pupils achieving 5 or more good GCSEs (including English and mathematics) remained a more important measure.

Generally, schools felt that it was too early to provide informed comment on the effect of the EBacc on post-16 progression. However, some schools did feel that it provided them with an additional tool for encouraging higher achieving pupils towards subject choices most beneficial for further and higher education.

For many parents the 5 or more A*-C measure remains a more important (and perhaps better known) measure of school performance. Most felt that the EBacc added little to their knowledge and understanding of school performance, and stressed that other factors such as ethos and atmosphere were equally important as performance measures.

**Debate about the English Baccalaureate**

Michael Gove’s oral statement about the reform of Key Stage 4 exams (17 September 2012) has introduced a new debate about the future of key stage 4. The Secretary of State’s speech criticises GCSE’s as an examination system designed in the past, with little rigour and quality, and proposes to replace them with new English Baccalaureate Certificates, backed up by ‘detailed records of achievement’ and reformed exam structures beyond this. The DfE press release on the EBacc research discussed in this briefing is headlined *Twice as many students now taking key academic subjects thanks to the EBacc* on 5 October 2012.

A return to academic rigour is, according to Michael Gove, the way forward and he points to falls in the position of England in International League tables as evidence, targeting modular structures and coursework assessment in particular as problems with the current system. The Secretary of State recognises that teachers have taught increasingly to the test, but blames this on GCSE exams rather than on holding schools to account through ‘league tables’.

The current trend towards a higher take up of EBacc subjects, which seems to be leading us in the direction the Secretary of State wants to take us, has been achieved at the expense of other equally important subjects such as music and religious studies according to Russell Hobby, the general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers;
"What we would like to see is a fully rounded baccalaureate which gives pupils a chance to show their academic and creative potential as well as volunteering and civic activities"

The Week with First Post headlined its coverage with ‘A Welcome for the EBacc – but is coursework really that bad?’, a point emphasised in coverage elsewhere. Professor Robert Coe director of the Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring at Durham University, said;

‘Coursework and modular exams have been getting a bad name recently but there are good educational reasons for including both in assessments. The problems come when you combine them with a high-pressure accountability system that includes league tables, closing down schools that don’t meet ‘floor targets’, and the general perception that exam results measure educational quality. The truth is that no kind of assessment can really withstand this kind of pressure. If the new exams better reward the kinds of learning we actually value then the change will be very welcome.’

Christine Blower, General Secretary of the National Union of Teachers, suggests some pupils will be worse off as a result of these proposed reforms, calling the proposals a ‘blatant two-tier system - pupils who do not gain EBacc Certificates will receive a record of achievement which will most certainly be seen to be of far less worth by employers and colleges’.

The Guardian reports that plans for a second tier examination were dropped in order that the Liberal Democrats could continue to support it, although the Liberal Democrat Voice signalling its dismay at Nick Clegg associating himself with this launch seems to belie this. The Times, focused on concerns for those unable to reach the EBacc standard, suggesting that ‘The answer is surely to provide a more rigorous and respected system of technical qualifications.’

Comment

Whilst it is clear the EBacc has played a significant role in reversing the decline in the take up of languages, it also appears to be reducing take up in religious education, creative subjects and some technical subjects. Headteacher’s concerns about retaining a broad and balanced curriculum do seem justified.

A report from the House of Commons Education Committee on the English Baccalaureate (see related briefings) contained submissions from manufacturing and vocational organisations but these are missing from the debate since then, even though Government information provides links to the thinking of the Russell group of Universities on appropriate routes for accessing higher education. This report did not take the opportunity provided by its qualitative remit of reviewing pupil and parent/carers perceptions of vocational awards and pathways that have been reduced, partly by the introduction of the EBacc performance measure. It remains to be seen if the idea in the Wolf Report that vocational pathways should be of higher quality and linked more to (often local) labour markets has been affected by the current implementation of EBacc. The links between schools, colleges, and the local labour market may well be one of the points of focus as local authorities and schools consider the DfE consultation on Reforming Key Stage 4 Qualifications which closes on 10 December 2012.
External downloads

Department for Education, The Effects of the English Baccalaureate (October 2012)
Department for Education, The Effects of the English Baccalaureate: Brief (October 2012)

Education Secretary Michael Gove’s oral statement about the reform of Key Stage 4 exams (17 September 2012)

DfE Consultation Reforming Key Stage 4 Qualifications (September 2012)

Review of vocational education - The Wolf Report

Related briefings

Reforming Key Stage 4 Qualifications (September 2012)

Examinations for 15-19 year olds in England – Commons Education Committee Report (September 2012)

Reform of 14-16 Performance Tables from 2014 (February 2012)

The English Baccalaureate (October 2011)

Review of Vocational Education – the Wolf Report (March 2011)

Schools White Paper – The Importance of Teaching (November 2010)

For further information, please visit www.lgiu.org.uk or email john.fowler@lgiu.org.uk