

University of Bath

Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification Internal Evaluation

Themed Report:

KEY SKILLS

[This is one of eight themed reports which draw on issues relating to particular themes that have arisen in different dimensions of the work of the WBQ Internal Evaluation team: further details appear in the various reports already generated on different dimensions of the WBQ pilot project]

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 One of the main aims of the Welsh Baccalaureate is to ensure that all students are equipped for progression in education, training and employment. This aim, in part, will be realised through the development and achievement of key skills. The inclusion of these skills in the 'core curriculum' was a significant feature of the design of this qualification. The key skills that form a component of the Welsh Baccalaureate Core have their origin in the Dearing Review (which recommended in 1996 that key skills should be available across both work-based and academic routes). Development work by QCA, ACCAC and CCEA resulted in specifications for delivering Communication, Application of Number and Information Technology, followed by comparable specifications for the 'wider' key skills: Working With Others, Improving Own Learning & Performance and Problem Solving. The importance of key skills was highlighted in the report 'Future Skills Wales' and is central to 14-19 developments promoted through the Learning Country and Learning Pathways in Wales.
- 1.2 The key skills component comprises four interconnecting parts:
- **An induction programme** that helps students understand and find their way around the key skills.
 - **A personal tutorial system** which focuses on building for each student an individual action plan and facilitating the achievement of the key skill of Improving Own Learning and Performance.
 - **Instruction and guidance** on specific aspects of acquiring key skills, for example the problem areas of application of number and building up evidence.
 - **Building a portfolio** of evidence
- 1.3 The recommended structure for delivering the Welsh Baccalaureate is based around a team of three key personnel: the WBQ Co-ordinator, the Personal Tutor and the Key Skills Co-ordinator, with an expectation that teams would be much larger than this (as, in practice, they are in most centres).
- 1.4 Key skills are based upon specifications and standards developed by the regulators (QCA, ACCAC and CCEA), who also produce the guidance materials, while assessment is the responsibility of the Awarding Bodies.

- 1.5 As with the optional component of the WBQ, centres have been at liberty to register for key skills with any of the Awarding Bodies. In practice this has resulted in key skills for some WBQ centres being assessed by Edexcel, OCR and AQA, while other centres have completed their key skills through the WJEC.
- 1.6 The WBQ Project Team's role with respect to key skills has thus been one of facilitating the process of key skills delivery, which has led to a number of challenges (discussed in more detail below).
- 1.7 This report looks at how the anticipated aims of the key skills programme have been carried through into practice, and records the experiences of centres in all three cohorts of the pilot scheme.

2. DELIVERY OF KEY SKILLS

- 2.1 Centres were generally attracted to the concept of the Welsh Baccalaureate with its breadth, coherence and the way it aims to prepare students for the 'next stages' of their personal education and training programmes. They were aware that this meant that students would acquire a wide range of key skills. It was anticipated that centres would base their WBQ programme on existing good practice. However a number of centres pointed out that key skills had rarely been successfully delivered to date and many centres, especially schools, had had minimal experience of key skills teaching and assessment. The fact that the WBQ offers a coherent framework for key skills and aims to raise their profile and status was seen by some centres as a significant factor when applying to join the pilot scheme.
- 2.2 However, for many centres, and especially schools, delivery of key skills was the biggest challenge they faced when introducing the WBQ. Existing work on delivering key skills in each centre had to be shaped in order that it would meet the WBQ requirements, the nature of key skills provision and organisation varies across the centres.
- 2.3 Some centres expressed concern that the overall WBQ workload for students was heavy, especially in relation to key skills, and that this workload was greater than had been anticipated.
- 2.4 As noted in the teaching & learning themed report, centres were encouraged to identify or signpost where core elements including key skills occurred, or could occur, in the optional or other core studies of the students. The task was then to map the unique individual route each student could follow in order to encounter the identified targets, so that progress of students in mastering their targets could then be tracked for verification and establishing further goals. Many centres expended a great deal of time on the signposting exercise, particularly with respect to academic optional studies, or were able to update the results of a parallel task when embarking on Curriculum 2000 for AS/A level students a few years previously.
- 2.5 Initial attempts at operating this approach were, however, often limited in their success, especially for level three courses, for a number of reasons discussed in more detail in the teaching & learning themed report, but including:
 - over reliance on the optional studies to deliver the desired topics;
 - expectation that all facets of a target could be delivered through this means;

- difficulty in securing the cooperation of all optional studies teachers in ensuring a particular aspect was not only included but students helped in identifying and recording the experience;
 - the requirement for teachers to recognise a cultural change in accepting that double accreditation for a single activity was not only necessary but also allowable;
 - an overoptimistic expectation that the evidence necessary for Key Skills or other WBQ core elements would occur naturally in the body of all syllabuses or pedagogical approaches; and
 - too great an expectation that students and their tutors would have the means and skills to recognise and map relevant targets.
- 2.6 When cohort 1 centres began their second year of delivery they gave a greater emphasis to planning for the delivery of Key Skills and integrating them into the Core and the options. For the most part, key skills were delivered through optional studies but the Core was also used. This more planned approach to the WBQ sometimes resulted in a diminution of student choice with respect to, eg, the predetermining of attainment levels available to students in the key skill areas. Application of number, for example, was frequently limited to the lower levels. Delivery of the Core was increasingly structured, the programme for the year often being presented during induction although there was cross referencing to key skills.
- 2.7 Cohort 2 centres clearly benefited from the lessons learnt by cohort 1. Most of these centres visited a cohort 1 centre prior to starting teaching the WBQ. Consequently there was evidence of greater planning and contextualisation of key skills in cohort 2 centres from the outset. There was also greater prior experience of key skills in those centres selected for participation in cohort 2 than there had been, overall, in cohort 1 centres.
- 2.8 Cohort 3 centres anticipated the positive impact the WBQ would have on their existing key skills programme. 3 out of the 7 centres in this cohort were already offering key skills although this is not so surprising as it was partly on this basis that centres were recommended by the Project Team for inclusion in the cohort.
- 2.9 Where centres had timetabled WBQ lessons some time was specifically put aside for the delivery of key skills. The general trend however was to integrate key skills, in both the options and the Core, instead of teaching them discretely. Some centres used special project days or events to deliver the wider key skills. Extensive use was made of the team enterprise activity for developing the wider key skills. Some centres found difficulty in integrating key skills for A-level students and the high level of paperwork and administration associated with the WBQ was a concern noted by some centres. The complex process of tracking, assessing and recording key skills added considerably to the administration of the WBQ.
- 2.10 Delays (on the part of the regulators) in producing key skills guidance and exemplars had caused frustration in some centres.
- 2.11 Where possible, centres identified members of staff with previous experience of key skills to be the key skills co-ordinator.
- 2.12 The effective delivery of key skills played a crucial role in the overall effectiveness of the WBQ programme.

3. ASSESSMENT OF KEY SKILLS

- 3.1 The change in 2004-05, ie part way through the pilot, in the way that key skills are assessed in Wales was generally seen as a positive move, with the removal of testing as a requirement and the portfolio of evidence becoming the sole requirement. Many centres felt that the change in assessment would make the WBQ achievable to more students, although some centres were not unhappy with the original system as it allowed them to 'teach to the test'.
- 3.2 An ongoing concern was that Intermediate students (especially lower attaining students) would not be able to cope with the demands of gaining evidence of all 6 key skills. The change in the specification to reduce demands was welcomed in this respect. Whereas many centres saw key skills as an attractive feature of the WBQ, they also recognised that achieving the key skills requirements was beyond the capabilities of some students. Many centres expressed a regret that a Foundation level WBQ had not been available from the outset, for this very reason.
- 3.3 The 'all or nothing' nature of the WBQ in which all the components have to be completed in order for the qualification to be awarded was a source of concern for some centres. Key Skills were often seen as the area that would not be completed.
- 3.4 The timing of completion of key skills would appear to be critical to success; many of those who failed at Intermediate level were attempting to complete all WBQ components at the same time. The more successful tended to have completed key skills earlier in the course, to allow for concentration on options towards the end of the year.
- 3.5 In awards made to date, it is interesting to note the success in key skills of substantial numbers of Intermediate students who (based on previous experience, and supported by comments from tutors) might not have been expected to achieve so well had they not been participating in the WBQ. This is true even when students have not been successful in completing the WBQ Diploma overall.

4. MONITORING OF KEY SKILLS

- 4.1 Guidance, monitoring and recording of key skills was seen as the responsibility of personal tutors in many centres, while in others it was seen as the responsibility of key skills tutors, with the majority of centres having different tutors responsible for the different key skills. Most centres have moved towards treating as discrete areas the 'teaching' of key skills (eg a weekly ICT lesson), and in such cases the key skills teacher takes responsibility for monitoring practice. In virtually all centres Improving Own Learning & Performance was seen as the responsibility of the personal tutor, and in a significant number of schools this was linked to UCAS applications for level 3 students.
- 4.2 By the second year of delivery, cohort 1 centres were being more rigorous with their monitoring procedures and had tighter control over the compilation of key skills portfolios. The tracking of key skill coverage improved considerably following the difficulties experienced in the first year.

5. STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

- 5.1 A number of students noted, in questionnaires and interviews organised by the internal evaluation team, that they gained confidence as a result of developing the key skills and were positive about this aspect of the WBQ. The integration of key skills in a project based approach to learning was seen as being important.
- 5.2 On the negative side, the breadth of the WBQ was seen as being more demanding than many students expected it to be and for many students this meant that they had difficulty in achieving the key skills. The challenge for some Intermediate students was seen as being unrealistic. For students who entered for the WBQ but did not complete, the lack of key skills was sometimes cited as the main reason for non-completion. The change in the assessment procedures made the WBQ more appropriate for students across the ability range.
- 5.3 It was noted that many students had developed an increased ability to learn independently and this may well have been due to the impact of the 'wider' key skills especially Improving Own Learning & Performance.
- 5.4 There is evidence that the second cohort of students had a more positive attitude to key skills and appeared to recognise their importance to a greater extent than the first cohort. It was recognised that the area that most students would struggle to complete would be Key Skills.
- 5.5 Student questionnaires asked whether they found Key Skills to be valuable, interesting and whether they would study them voluntarily. Key Skills was consistently seen as the second most interesting aspect of the WBQ (work-related education being the most interesting). Considerably more students found key skills to be of value than those that claimed to find them interesting.
- 5.6 When students were asked whether they would study key skills voluntarily they gave a positive response that was higher than any other component except work related education, although there was some concern about the workload involved. These responses were consistent across all student questionnaires sent out at different stages of the pilot.

6. STAFF TRAINING

- 6.1 Some staff found it difficult to integrate key skills into their subject teaching and this was seen as the main area where training was required. The need for training covered both planning for integration of key skills and their assessment. The need for training on the wider key skills was greater than for Communication, Assessment of Number and IT.
- 6.2 WBQ-directed key skills training sessions have been offered by the Project Team throughout the pilot; some centres did not attend such workshops, even though they realised that training was needed. Support has also been provided for WJEC key skills centres by the WJEC key skills team, as it has been for other centres by their respective key skills awarding bodies (Edexcel, OCR and AQA). Recently negotiation has taken place to ensure that these awarding bodies also provide WBQ-directed training.
- 6.3 Key skills continues to be a significant area of need for staff training.

7. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

- The framework for Key Skills and the high status given to them are significant factors when centres decide to offer the WBQ.
- As with non-WBQ centres, key skills have proved difficult to deliver, and are recognised as being problematic in ensuring student attainment.
- Relatively few teachers had experience of teaching and assessing key skills when embarking upon the WBQ: in general, colleges were better prepared for key skills than schools.
- The most successful centres integrate key skills into the core and the options.
- Challenges with respect to key skills have arisen as a result of:
 - ❖ specification and assessment changes part way through the pilot;
 - ❖ lack of key skills experience in many centres prior to WBQ implementation;
 - ❖ delays on the part of the regulators in producing guidance and exemplars; and
 - ❖ (in part) the division of functions between regulators (responsible for specifications and standards); awarding bodies (responsible for assessment) and WBQ Project Team (responsible for overall curriculum).
- To a great extent, the success of a centre offering the WBQ is related to its ability to deliver key skills effectively.
- Successful centres also ensure that students are supported in mastering the key skills, and are given the opportunity to practise through core and options.
- Key Skills is the area where most staff recognise there is a need for training. Training needs to cover all aspects of key skills: planning, integration, delivery and assessment.

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May 2006