

Themed Report:

MARKETING AND PROMOTION

[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 Marketing and Promotion has been a feature in virtually all interviews of staff and students on visits and by telephone to pilot centres over the past three years. In addition, the questionnaires to students in all cohorts have also sought responses on the sources and quality of information they had received on the WBQ prior to starting post-16 courses. Insight on this issue was also available from some of the stakeholder interviews, if not through specific comment then from the apparent limited or absence of knowledge displayed by some respondents.

2. PUBLIC AWARENESS OF WBQ

2.1 A recurring claim of pilot centres throughout the evaluation has been of the negligible public awareness of the Welsh Bac. This perception is supported by the experiences of students in both cohorts and has been a feature of parents' evenings.

2.2 In the early years of the project there were not infrequent references by centres to them encountering some popular misconceptions about the WBQ. These included the impression that it was to be delivered compulsorily in Welsh; that it was a replacement qualification for A levels, or that it was synonymous with the International Baccalaureate (IB). In general, these appear to have diminished of late although even cohort 3 centres reported continuing confusion in some quarters with the IB. There was also some early evidence of negativity towards the WBQ by proponents of the model proposed by the Institute for Welsh Affairs (IWA), although this appears to have been less in evidence of late.

2.3 From the early days of their association with the project, the cohort 1 centres claim to have had an expectation of receiving 'significant support from the WJEC and the WAG in promoting the image and value of the WBQ.' Some centres from all cohorts have, especially during their preparatory year, stated their belief in a need for a major national launch seemingly unaware of the not inconsiderable promotional work assumed by the WJEC project team as well as attendances at many parents' evenings and open days. This includes, incidentally, the centrally produced marketing literature used by many centres and the presentations of team members at influential conferences. It is also interesting to note in this context that 17 of the first cohort considered the WAG as having a positive view towards the WBQ, with the Minister recognised by 16 centres as having a pivotal role in the future of the initiative. It is undoubtedly the case that the very positive statements made by the Minister on a number of public platforms at various points throughout the duration of the pilot, and the fact that she has been a consistent and supportive presence from its inception, have been helpful in raising the profile of the WBQ both in Wales and beyond.

- 2.4 Centres rarely acknowledged that the WBQ is a pilot project limited to a select few schools and colleges, making a wholesale comprehensive publicity campaign a somewhat presumptuous activity should the qualification be confined to this trial period. In fact, this view was forwarded by just one college in considering national promotion to be an appropriate activity only if, or when, the qualification became available to all post-16 students in Wales.
- 2.5 In spite of these perceived limitations of national promotion, a number of centres from all cohorts claim to have identified by the fourth year of the pilot a growing public awareness of the WBQ.
- 2.6 The interviews with stakeholders demonstrated that only one of the five business representatives interviewed had prior knowledge of the WBQ. This was a concern of two of the Assembly members interviewed, who considered there to be 'a need for a higher level of information provision' (though without necessarily specifying by whom the information should be provided).

3 PROFESSIONAL AWARENESS OF WBQ

- 3.1 There was an opinion identified by one of the educational stakeholder interviews that whilst 'colleagues were aware of the WBQ as a qualification ... there appeared to be a general lack of detailed knowledge and freely available information.' These doubts were echoed by an LEA representative who wondered 'whether some schools were totally clear about the WBQ and whether the pilot was transmitting its aims effectively to Head Teachers and other leaders.'
- 3.2 An admittedly small sample of Heads of schools not involved in the pilot was interviewed very early in the project and again 3 years later. Two schools not bidding to join cohort 1 successfully applied to be part of the third cohort not least because of a greater understanding of the project. This implication of an increased availability of information on the WBQ is supported by the comments from the Heads of the other schools in the sample, all of whom claimed to be aware of WBQ developments to the degree they required for decision taking. Whilst some seemed well informed it could not be claimed that there was sufficient evidence to suggest a universal awareness about the WBQ to inform current debate on the 14-19 curriculum in all centres.
- 3.3 Throughout the project to date, however, there has been little direct reference to networking the experiences of pilot centres to non-involved schools and colleges. There has been mention of a few LEA taking a proactive stance in holding conferences for the sharing of the experiences in pilot schools in their area. Most dissemination appears to have occurred through agenda items at local and national professional meetings although at least one school held a well attended open conference on their experiences in the pilot.
- 3.4 More disconcertingly has been the evidence from a small minority of centres, supported by the comments of students, that staff not involved in the project are patently uninterested and, in a very few instances, openly critical or obstructive of the WBQ. There is also evidence; however, that the majority of centres have actively informed and involved all staff on WBQ developments and this form of promotion appears to be an influential factor in ensuring successful implementation of the project.
- 3.5 The issue of acceptance of the Advanced Diploma by Higher Education Institutes has been a consistent and continuing concern of students, parents and staff. The work of the Higher Education Advisory Team (HEAT) has been influential in promoting the WBQ and securing the support of many university admission tutors. This has been

enhanced by the influence of the UCAS decision on points value and the conferences for HE admission tutors held in 2004 and 2005. Although there are some encouraging reports emerging from students benefiting from achieving the diploma, there remain examples of an alleged unawareness by some admission tutors or inconsistent responses within some universities.

- 3.6 Similarly, the issue of ensuring recognition by employers has been an on-going challenge. The establishment of an Employers Advisory Group is intended to assist with providing advice as to how best to disseminate information, and an information leaflet targeted specifically at employers has recently been produced. Discussions are on-going with respect to the possibility of organising some form of 'kite-marking' of the Intermediate Diploma by a group with credibility among employers, as a means of providing a form of external recognition similar in concept to the UCAS tariff in the context of the Advanced Diploma.

4 MARKETING OF WBQ BY PILOT CENTRES

- 4.1 All pilot centres have developed marketing strategies using specially prepared materials supplemented by nationally available resources; information in prospectuses and promotional meetings for parents and prospective students. Whilst the majority of centres use their web sites most effectively in accessing potential baccalaureate students there are a few who do not use this media to the full in the promotion of their available WBQ opportunities.
- 4.2 The degree of sophistication of the promotional strategy is usually related to the intended involvement of students in the WBQ. In the majority of pilot centres the qualification is an obligatory core element accompanying any chosen course, whether for the whole of the sixth form in the case of schools or for all students on a particular vocational course in a college. In these cases the marketing strategy could be described as informative-reassuring in being based on the premise that 'there is an element of trust with a school that builds up over the years ... students will [want] to come back and their parents will encourage this.' Behind this lies the confident assumption of most of these centres that students enrol in sixth forms and for specific vocational courses because of their primary interest in the optional elements as 'the potential market out there is for [the] subject rather than for the WBQ'.
- 4.3 There is evidence that most, if not all, schools that have made the WBQ obligatory for A-level students in their sixth forms have encountered some resistance from a minority of vociferous parents and students who have not been convinced by the persuading arguments. The true extent of this opposition has been difficult to gauge from interviews with staff although a few schools admit that they have encountered some difficulties and have had to adopt strategies accordingly. Selected students interviewed, however, have tended to be overwhelmingly favourable towards the WBQ.
- 4.4 A few schools with obligatory WBQ launched the project to the parents of their first cohort with a high profile presentation involving distinguished political and academic guest speakers. Subsequent presentations have tended to be lower key as there was some concern following these 'big bang' starts that it was a forum for dissenting voices to gain attention and credibility even if representing minority views.
- 4.5 In a few schools marketing of the WBQ is deliberately limited relying on the ambition of the student to progress to the sixth form or even, as in one cohort 2 school, 'not to market too heavily in case it alienated some [potential] students.' In more than one school actual promotion of the WBQ focuses on the skills and broadening opportunities to justify the value of compulsory extension studies with the WBQ itself assuming a low

profile with even the impression that it might be an optional extra to be decided upon at a later date.

- 4.6 For a few pilot schools and colleges, mainly concerning AS/A2 level courses, the WBQ is undertaken by students on a voluntary basis. In these cases the marketing strategy tends to the promotional-persuasive mode. In fact the voluntary nature of involvement was considered by some centres to be an essential marketing device encouraging the concept of personal choice.
- 4.7 For these centres the marketing activities tend to be considerably more extensive and varied with a greater amount of explanatory literature generally available alongside specially convened meetings and presentations.
- 4.8 For colleges a consistently reported problem encountered in the implementation of their marketing programme is actually accessing year 11 students whilst they are still at school. Presentations in schools are often limited and specially arranged open meetings can have limited success. One college typically reported organising two WBQ information evenings and advertising them in the local press but with no attendance on either occasion. In reality, they have found that potential students are only interested in specific options on open evenings with little attention given to any optional element such as the WBQ.
- 4.9 Colleges with voluntary involvement frequently report that the major marketing takes place at admission in September after the students have left school. Some of these students have related in interviews that they felt they were pressurised to take the WBQ rather than the total freedom of choice implied by the marketing policy.

5 INDUCTION PROGRAMMES

- 5.1 The induction programme is identified in the WBQ guidelines as being a major opportunity to influence students' perceptions of the qualification. As such, it can be considered an important component in the promotion of the qualification in shaping students' initial attitudes towards it.
- 5.2 Completed student questionnaires indicated that the reaction of students to their induction experience was very mixed, with few overwhelmingly positive responses. The first generation of cohort one students were the least enthusiastic, an attitude which became increasingly obvious through the succession of questionnaires completed as they progressed through their course. The responses of cohort two students, however, ranged across a wider spectrum with a significant minority reacting favourably to the experience. It may be worth noting, in this context, that centres planning induction programmes for the first cohort were doing so at a time of developing guidelines.
- 5.3 From interviews with students there have been, however, examples of effective and appreciated induction programmes. Many cohort one centres, recognising the inadequacies of their initial efforts, made significant changes for their second generation of WBQ students although this has not, as yet, greatly influenced students' collective reactions to the induction process. A factor that should be considered in interpreting these responses emerged from personal interviews with students when it became apparent that there may be confusion over the term induction. For some students this seems to have been interpreted as any information provided by the centre prior to embarking on their course rather than the specific 'opening' programme referred to in the guidelines and as meant in the questionnaire.

- 5.4 In the centres which gained the greatest approbation of students for the induction programme there was reference to, 'getting to know each other, 'having fun' and 'understanding what the course was about.' The social dimension featured as an the objective of many centres with colleges, in particular, trying to work with groups of students, the vast majority of whom are likely to be strangers to each other. The idea of interesting 'fun' activities was also mentioned by centres as a means of enthusing students at the start of their WBQ programmes. It would seem, however, that some centres did not also include activities or content specifically designed to adequately induct students into a WBQ course. This may be an indication of why many students, in successive questionnaires, expressed diminishing appreciation of their induction experience and increasing criticism of an unanticipated workload.

6 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

- 6.1 There was a general expectation in pilot centres of an early national publicity campaign promoting the WBQ. There is reason to doubt, however, the feasibility of such a course of action in a pilot project.
- 6.2 The central project team has fulfilled an immense role in promoting the qualification through the production of materials and personal commitments.
- 6.3 Though there is some perceived increase in public awareness of the WBQ, the general impression of staff and students is of continuing limited knowledge about the qualification.
- 6.4 There is, perhaps unsurprisingly, no evidence of widespread knowledge of the WBQ in the business, industrial or commercial world at this stage.
- 6.5 There is an apparent, and understandable, lack of detailed knowledge about the WBQ in schools and LEAs, which may have implications for take-up and support at a time of possible 'roll-out.'
- 6.6 The work of the Higher Education Advisory Team (HEAT) has been influential in promoting the WBQ and securing the support of many university admission tutors. Given the complexity of admissions criteria along with the numbers and frequent changes of admission tutors, this is likely to be a continuing task.
- 6.7 With a few notable exceptions, pilot centres have generally been proactive in promoting and marketing the WBQ to their potential students.
- 6.8 Some schools with a 'guaranteed' sixth form population are less aggressive in their marketing as are some colleges where the qualification is an obligatory element of the optional study.
- 6.9 Some colleges would appreciate a greater opportunity to explain the WBQ to potential students while they are still in year 11.
- 6.10 Student reactions to induction programmes are mixed, although a general negativity may be ascribed to a misinterpretation of induction as referring to all the information provided by a centre prior to the student embarking on a WBQ course.
- 6.11 If the decision is made to 'roll-out' the WBQ following the end of the pilot phase, a major publicity event would seem to be desirable as a means of helping to raise the WBQ profile.

University of Bath
May 2006