

Themed Report:

RESPONSES AND RECOGNITION

[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 Crucial to the success of any curriculum innovation is an awareness of, and positive response to, the new development by all groups of stakeholders. In the case of what might be referred to as a 'top down' innovation, where many stakeholders may have previously been content with the status quo, ensuring a positive response presents particular challenges.
- 1.2 Challenges are also presented in the case of the WBQ innovation by its aim of inclusivity. By attempting to satisfy needs in both academic and vocational areas, and in both higher education and employment, the task of ensuring firstly that all stakeholders are aware of it, and secondly that they respond positively to it, was likely to take some time to achieve.
- 1.3 Marketing a pilot development presents challenges in the sense that publicity has to some extent been inhibited by the fact that the WBQ was in pilot mode. There has been reluctance in some cases to market it too actively in the absence of certainty as to whether or not the WBQ will be 'rolled out' at the end of the pilot phase.
- 1.4 Given the disparate nature of the many stakeholders with an interest in the developing WBQ, and the different (though sometimes overlapping) challenges and issues arising in each case, each is considered below under a separate heading: Higher Education, employers, parents and others.

2. HIGHER EDUCATION

- 2.1 HE is of relevance to just one group of those studying for the qualification – principally those aiming at the award of the Advanced Diploma – and of no obvious relevance to those without such aspirations. For those completing the Advanced Diploma and wishing to study at a higher education institution (HEI), a positive response to the WBQ by HEIs is clearly crucial, not only within Wales but also within England and, to a lesser extent, Scotland and Northern Ireland.
- 2.2 The establishment early in the pilot of the HE Advisory Team (HEAT), composed of admissions officers from a number of Welsh and English universities as well as representatives from UCAS and the Project Team, and chaired and organised by the internal evaluation team, has proved valuable in ensuring admissions staff in the member HEIs are well-informed about its development. It has also proved valuable more broadly – its main purpose – in offering advice as to how information about the WBQ may best be disseminated to admissions staff at HEIs around the UK. The HEAT team and Project Team are working closely to build up the database of formal recognition statements from HEIs, which is being shared with pilot centres, and a

promotional flier has recently been produced specifically for HEIs; guidance for admissions tutors on making offers has also recently been distributed to all HEIs. Also making a positive contribution to spreading the word to HEIs have been the two conferences organised by the Key Skills Agency in 2004 and 2005; including presentations by and discussions with participating WBQ students, these conferences appeared helpful in encouraging admissions staff to recognise some of the benefits of WBQ participation.

2.3 Indications to date are that dissemination to HEIs has been successful in some respects, though awareness-raising has been complicated by the nature of the HEI admissions process. While most central admissions staff have received information about the WBQ, it is less likely that the word will have reached all admissions tutors in all departments of all HEIs. Indeed even in cases where a HEI has provided a formal statement indicating recognition of the WBQ, there have been examples of admissions tutors in the same organisation appearing not to be familiar with the new qualification.

2.4 Response to the WBQ (in addition to awareness) is the other dimension crucial to those applying for university-level study. Given the enormous variation within the higher education sector, including differences in whether or not the UCAS tariff system is used and the level of prior academic achievement required before a place will be offered (linked to differences between what are now commonly referred to as 'recruiting' and 'selecting' universities), it could not have been expected that a uniform response would be received from all departments within all HEIs. Based on evidence gathered to date (principally relating to the Summer 2005 award of the Advanced Diploma), it would appear that HEIs fall into the following categories in terms of their response to the WBQ:

- Those that are positive about the WBQ in terms of the increased breadth of experience it provides, but have not been prepared to amend their offers to note this response in any formal sense
- Those that recognise the UCAS tariff for the WBQ (120 points for the core, when the Advanced Diploma is awarded) without specifying how the total number of UCAS tariff points required is broken down
- Those that recognise the UCAS tariff for the WBQ and make offers that specify the minimum number of tariff points to come from the options (in some cases, in effect, not giving full value to the 120 core tariff points)
- Those that do not use the UCAS tariff but make offers that give credit for the WBQ by, eg, asking for 2 A levels rather than the usual 3, or for lower grades in one or more A levels in recognition of the additional work involved in successfully completing the core
- Those that are prepared to accept tariff points from the core whether or not the full Advanced Diploma has been awarded. Though it was not anticipated that HEIs would respond in this way (since the core certificate issued on successful completion of the core does not appear in the National Qualifications Framework and is therefore not a qualification), there is evidence to suggest that one or two HEIs are prepared to consider tariff points from the core in its own right.
- Those that have made it clear that, while being aware of the WBQ, they have no interest in the fact that students have been awarded the qualification; such departments are generally highly selective and take a view that the best

preparation for university level study in their subject area is high performance in specified A level subjects.

- 2.5 Admissions staff, both during conferences and in HEAT discussions, have raised as an issue the ungraded nature of the core, with a common view being that knowing the extent of an applicant's success in their core studies would assist decisions on whether or not to make an offer and/or what the nature of that offer should be.
- 2.6 In collaboration with members of the HEAT team, internal evaluation team members have recently sought perceptions of WBQ participation, through questionnaires and interviews, from successful WBQ students who are now in their first year of university level study. Interviews are also being organised with a number of HEI tutors in order to seek their views on the WBQ in general, and on the extent to which it appears to prepare students for HEI studies in particular.
- 2.7 Clearly the issue of HEI recognition will continue to be central to the success of the WBQ. There is evidence, for instance, of some participating students aiming for HEI admission in autumn 2005 having dropped their WBQ studies (other than options) following receipt of an offer of a university place which ignored the core. If students perceive this sort of response to be widespread, it may well become increasingly difficult to persuade Advanced Diploma students of the worth of WBQ study.

3. EMPLOYERS

- 3.1 Raising awareness of the WBQ among employers has been challenging, given the enormous number of small businesses in existence in addition to the larger organisations. No attempt has been made to disseminate information outside Wales as yet, with efforts to date prioritising the Welsh context.
- 3.2 Centres have their own links with local employers, and a certain amount of dissemination of information has taken place through such links, including the Work Related Education dimension of the core. At least one employer was represented on the Consultative Committee involved in early discussions of WBQ development, and the Project Team later established an Employer Advisory Group (EAG) which has now met on two occasions. The Project Team has also produced a flier designed particularly for employers, with input from the EAG.
- 3.3 In March and April 2005, representatives of five employers in Wales were visited and interviewed by members of the internal evaluation team. Based in different parts of Wales and involved in a range of different types of business, only one had previously heard of the WBQ and all were of the view that more effective dissemination of information was required (a number of helpful suggestions were made in this respect). Response of these employers to the objectives of the WBQ model varied, with those from the service sectors seeming to value the 'soft skills' likely to be developed through the core, while those from the industrial sector tended to set greater store by the options in delivering the more 'technical' skills. Work Related Education and the Communications Key Skill elicited a positive response more generally.

4. PARENTS

- 4.1 No data has been systematically gathered as part of the internal evaluation process with respect to parental response to the WBQ. Anecdotal evidence, however, based on attendance by internal evaluation team members at two school parents evenings, awareness of a small amount of correspondence from parents and comments from

centres during visits, suggest (as would be expected) some variation in parental response.

- 4.2 One response typical of a group of well-informed, articulate parents at one parents evening could be summarised as 'this school already offered a highly successful A level programme, with students securing places at well-respected universities; why change it?', supplemented in some cases by a concern that the additional demands of the WBQ would threaten student achievement in A level subjects. Another response, again from a number of well-informed and articulate parents at a parents evening, could be summarised as 'many of the additional demands of the WBQ seem to represent aspects of the curriculum with which our children would be involved anyway in addition to their A level subjects; the WBQ represents a way of recognising and giving credit for this additional work and is therefore a positive innovation'. It seems likely that there is also a group of parents who know little, if anything, about their son's/daughter's WBQ involvement.
- 4.3 Data currently being gathered on parental perceptions by the External Evaluators (which will be shared with the Internal Evaluation team) should inform our understanding in this area.

5. OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

- 5.1 Relatively little systematically-gathered data exists in relation to the perceptions of a number of other stakeholder groups with an interest in the WBQ. Interviews undertaken by the internal evaluation team between January and April 2005 sought the views of 3 Assembly Members, 3 Local Education Authority representatives, 2 Estyn inspectors and one representative each from ELWa, UCAS, Fforwm and ACCAC, as well as the Chief Executive of the WJEC.
- 5.2 All were reasonably well-informed overall, though some were more positive about the WBQ than others: there were differences, for instance, between the 3 AMs (from Labour, Conservative and Plaid Cymru parties). All interviewees stressed the importance of ensuring wide visibility of the WBQ throughout Wales, including within HE and employment sectors, if the WBQ is to be successful in the longer term.
- 5.3 Regular meetings between the Project Team and Careers Wales have helped to ensure understanding of the WBQ within this organisation.

6. MEDIA

- 6.1 Media coverage of the WBQ has been sporadic and inconsistent in nature. There has been relatively little coverage in the press, radio or television, and what there has been has sometimes appeared to arise more from a concern to 'write a good story' than necessarily to provide a balanced and accurate picture.
- 6.2 Press and television coverage during the Summer 2005 award of results was a case in point: while helping to raise the profile of the WBQ, and thus in one sense assisting with recognition, the somewhat skewed nature of the messages conveyed were not necessarily helpful in conveying a balanced overview of WBQ development.
- 6.3 It has been the view of a number of those interviewed during visits to pilot centres that more could and should have been done centrally (by the Welsh Assembly Government and also, perhaps, by the Project Team) to ensure that information about the WBQ was widely disseminated throughout Wales. The point was made on more than one occasion, however, that in some communities local (rather than national) newspapers

would be more likely to be read – thus highlighting the challenges faced in attempting to organise such dissemination nationally.

- 6.4 Some centres are clearly more experienced than others at promoting themselves in the media; in those centres with good media relations this has worked to the advantage of the WBQ. Good coverage in local press has often been fed by WBQ staff in centres, particularly in relation to high profile activities such as overseas visits by WBQ students.

7. INSTITUTE FOR WELSH AFFAIRS

In terms of response and recognition, note should be made of the history to the development of the WBQ, whereby the IWA had argued strongly for the development of a Welsh Baccalaureate modelled on the International Baccalaureate Diploma; an argument rejected by the Welsh Assembly Government in favour of the model now in place. The negative response to the WBQ of some supporters of the IWA model, and the messages communicated both formally (through articles in the press, for instance) and more informally, have contributed to the potential for misinformation and confusion throughout the various stakeholder constituencies in Wales. This was particularly the case in the earlier days of WBQ piloting; there is less evidence of it being an issue more recently.

8. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

- 8.1 It is clear that, if the WBQ is to be successful, it needs to be both familiar to and valued by a range of different stakeholder groups. Central to widespread recognition and acceptance is the response from HE and employers, from whom a number of other groups are likely to take their lead.
- 8.2 Recognition and acceptance has to date been mixed; perhaps not surprisingly given the relatively early stage of development. These early stages are, however, crucial in that impressions formed by students, parents and teachers about the value of the WBQ are being influenced by the value placed on it by HE and employers. More work would seem to be called for in building on that already undertaken in disseminating information to these two groups in particular.

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