

Themed Report:

STUDENT ATTAINMENT AND PROGRESSION

[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 The Welsh Baccalaureate Diploma has official recognition within the National Qualifications Framework and, as such, an evaluation of students' attainment needs to include criteria traditionally associated with other public examinations particularly those relating to completion and pass rates. However, so complex and unique are the contents and objectives of the WBQ that an evaluation concerned solely with those students attaining the Diploma would fail to represent adequately the achievements of all those involved in following the WBQ programme. Firstly, the WBQ curriculum incorporates key skills and optional studies in which students could conceivably attain qualifications without necessarily gaining the WBQ. Secondly, the objectives of the qualification specifically identify social and personal skills which may be promoted, acquired or practised to a significant degree without students necessarily reaching the awarding stage of the WBQ.
- 1.2 The data and information contributing to this evaluation has been mainly limited to that concerning students in the first pilot cohort targeting the inaugural awards for the Advanced Diploma and only the first two at Intermediate level. Accordingly, suppositions concerning causal factors and conclusions are necessarily tentative and subject to amendment as further information becomes available.
- 1.3 This report should be read in conjunction with the papers prepared by the WBQ project team of the WJEC on the 2005 examination cycles of both the Intermediate and Advanced levels for more detailed statistics and exploratory conclusions. These also contain the detailed reports and conclusions of the Senior Moderator on the assessment of Individual Investigations and students' records.

2. COMPLETION AND PASS RATES

- 2.1 The WBQ varies from the practice normally found in most subject examination procedures in requiring pilot centres to precede the entry stage with the registration of students when they embark upon the course of study that is assumed will result in them being examined for the award of the appropriate diploma at anything up to a year and a half hence. The reason for this early registration is not only to allow time for verification and recording of students' prior and emerging achievements but, more significantly, to quantify the allowable project funding for a pilot centre based on participating WBQ students. The actual entry process for the WBQ summer series is scheduled at roughly the same time as all other examination entries of the WJEC.
- 2.2 In the first cohort some disappointment was expressed at the numbers of Intermediate and Advanced level students being lost to the WBQ between the registration and entry

points. There is no apparent substance, however, to a suggestion that this represents a lower completion rate of post-16 studies amongst WBQ students. Participating centres reported that the vast majority of students leaving the WBQ element of their course were continuing with their optional studies and that the numbers leaving before the completion of their studies were not significantly different from that found in previous and parallel groups. In fact, there is some anecdotal evidence to suggest that a limited number of students may have been motivated to continue with their courses because of the possibility of attaining a WBQ award.

2.3 In considering the reasons for a significant number of students not progressing to the entry stage no definitive cause has been identified although, from interviews with students and teaching staff, possible factors might include:

- An air of optimism at the very start of the delivery stage, compounded by an awareness that project funding was related to student numbers, may have contributed to an unrealistic expectation that all potential candidates would successfully complete a WBQ programme.
- The reported resentment amongst some students at the qualification being obligatory for them resulting in their failure becoming a self fulfilling prophecy as they deliberately refused to conform to course requirements.
- Students who fell too far behind with recording and compiling their key skills portfolio to remediate the situation especially in the absence of rigorous monitoring in the early stages.
- Failure to complete the Individual Investigation
- Students' confidence being eroded by negative comments about the qualification either within the centre from uninvolved staff or externally from such sources as Higher Education admission tutors.
- A hesitant start to delivery in some centres resulting in a failure to secure the interest or confidence of students.

These suggestions relate particularly to experiences and observations in the initial delivery programme of cohort one centres and there is emerging evidence that the practice with later student groups and in other cohorts may be moderating the existence or impact of these factors.

2.4 An examination of the prior achievements of students who were entered for the Advanced Diploma indicates that the Key Stage three scores and GCSE attainments of those who completed the WBQ programme were, on average, higher than those who failed to complete. However, whilst a higher percentage of the completing group gained five or more GCSE grades C and above as well as achieving an average of one subject more than the non-completers, caution is due in ascribing this as a major factor contributing to non-completion. The prior achievements of non completers are indicative of an ability to undertake successfully level three studies as shown by their attainment of optional studies. Furthermore, the range of prior achievements within each group suggests that this should not, in itself, be considered as the determining factor.

2.5 It is possible to make an unfavourable comparison between the pass rates in the 2005 WBQ examination series at both Intermediate and Advanced levels and those of the

more traditional academic subjects and vocational courses. Again, however, any conclusions need to be tempered by reference to the limitations in the source of data when even this offers some indication of a developing situation as referred to in the WBQ report. It was noted that not only had there been a significant increase in the number and percentage completion rates of Intermediate students since the first group in 2004 but also in the pass rate of those completing students. A major issue in considering pass rates lies in the inordinate number of students who do not complete the course requirements by the time of assessment after being entered for the examination. In 2005 only 48% of Intermediate and 60% of Advanced Diploma candidates completed their programme. One of the major reasons offered by centres for incompleteness by level 2 students was that a significant minority of them left school or college after entry often as a result of obtaining employment. Incompletion of one or more elements of the WBQ was the single most frequently cited cause for both intermediate and advanced students with the Independent Investigation leading the list for both groups. This suggests that it was improbable that students failing to complete the course after entry were not successfully completing a significant number of the required elements. This is supported by the number who deferred completion until the spring series in both 2005 and 2006.

It may also be that some of the reasons suggested for the drop out of students after registration may also apply at this stage. Indeed, there were reports of some students deciding not to complete their WBQ after receiving University admission offers based entirely on performance in their optional studies or on encountering negative comments on the WBQ from admission tutors. There is also, largely anecdotal, evidence that some students faced with completion tasks for the WBQ as they approached the final assessment of their options abandoned the former in order to concentrate on the latter. Judging by reports from centres it appears that many have acknowledged the above by adjusting their delivery schedules to ensure that all or most of the required facets are successfully accomplished before entry which, if achieved, should result in a greater completion rate after entry in future.

- 2.6 The actual Advanced Diploma pass rate achieved by completing students was encouragingly high, with 85% of them attaining the award and with a further 6% gaining the Advanced Core Certificate only as they failed to achieve the requisite passes in their optional areas. This effective 91% pass rate for the completing students *is not drastically at variance with the equivalent percentage achieved in traditional WJEC A-levels*. By far the most common reason for completing students to attain neither Diploma nor Core was a failure to achieve the six Key Skills at the requisite levels. Some centres have suggested that these students would not, in fact, been entered for the Diploma if the results of their Key Skills assessments had been known at the time of entry. Again, there is evidence from second cohorts of Advanced students that they are successfully completing the Key Skills before entry for the WBQ is confirmed which suggests a beneficial impact on future pass rates. Of note is that successful female students of the Advanced Diploma outnumber their male peers by more than two to one. This may be a reflection of the most frequently occurring optional studies of History, English and Biology at GCE and Business Studies, Travel and Tourism and Health and Social Care in AVCE. There has been no suggestion to date that the WBQ demands may favour students of certain subjects which, from the above, tend to be traditionally female dominated. It would, however, appear to warrant further investigation.
- 2.7 At level 2, 59% of candidates who completed the programme were awarded the Intermediate Diploma in 2005 with a further 5% gaining a Core Certificate. This was a considerable advance on the inaugural summer series of 2004. It is also worth noting that a significant number of intermediate students defer completion until the following

Spring series which makes a simplistic analysis of the Summer series in isolation potentially misleading. As with the Advanced Diploma there are over twice as many successful female candidates as male with the traditional female programmes of Child Care, Business Studies, Leisure and Travel and Health and Social Care again dominating option choices. Once more this may suggest the validity of further study to examine any issues of gender advantage or compatibility between optional courses and WBQ demands. Also mirroring the Advanced Diploma results, the major reason for completing Intermediate students failing to achieve the core certificate was through not gaining the requisite number of key skills at the necessary levels. Unlike level 3 students, however, a number of these will have the opportunity to complete their key skills requirements to obtain the WBQ in the following Spring series.

Of particular note with respect to the Intermediate Diploma were the results of successful students given their generally modest prior achievements. Both completing and non-completing students had, on average, 1.6 GCSE with grades equal or greater than a C with approximately only 6% of successful students starting their course with 5 or more higher GCSE grades. This is a commendable advance in level 2 attainment by a significant number of students following a WBQ programme. Nevertheless a number of centres have welcomed the proposed introduction of a Foundation level award as they considered a number of students were obliged to be entered at, for them, an inappropriate Intermediate level in the absence of a more appropriate Foundation level.

3 ATTAINMENT IN ASSOCIATED AREAS

- 3.1 The WBQ was deliberately designed to 'safeguard candidates' interests' by being based partly on existing qualifications. In effect, all students following a Diploma programme have the 'safety net' of attaining success in their chosen subjects or vocational focus of their optional studies even if they fail to attain the required standard for a WBQ award. A consideration of the reasons forwarded by centres in 2005 to explain why Advanced Diploma students did not complete their programmes indicates that the vast majority were due to difficulties encountered in completing aspects of the core itself. It was the clear contention of centres that most non-completing Baccalaureate students continued with their optional studies thereby fulfilling a founding principle of the qualification. This is supported by the data that 51% of the completing students who failed to achieve a Diploma still attained success in their optional elements. Similarly at Intermediate level students not completing the WBQ programme were able to complete their optional area. However, the evidence also indicates that a significant proportion of these students left school or college before the completion of their course. It was the contention of the colleges, in particular, that this was not exceptional and was usually due to students obtaining employment and there was no suggestion that the WBQ had been a contributing factor. Of those completing the WBQ programme but failing to gain an Intermediate Diploma, 51% attained success in their optional studies again suggesting the safe guarding aspect of the WBQ model.
- 3.2 The other components of the WBQ in which students can achieve independent levels of attainment recognised through national framework qualifications are the key skills. Obviously those awarded the Diploma gained all six key skills with a not insignificant few gaining higher levels in more of the key skills than actually specified in the WBQ requirements. Of note is that those students failing to achieve the Advanced Diploma still obtained an average of 3.5 key skills each of which 61% were at level 3 and the remainder at level 2. At Intermediate level, the average number of key skills gained by students completing the programme but failing to be awarded the Diploma was 4.1 of which 67% were at level 2. These levels of attainment suggest that there are significant

partial achievements being made by completing students even if they are unable to attain all the required standards for the awarding of a Diploma.

- 3.3 No overwhelming evidence has yet emerged that students' achievements in the optional studies are being adversely influenced by their involvement in a WBQ programme. Some students at both levels have, however, claimed to have terminated their involvement in the WBQ in order to focus on their optional studies with, in a very small number of cases, the encouragement of their teachers. Conversely, there have been anecdotal accounts from staff that, for some students, involvement in the WBQ programme has stimulated or enhanced their skills in order to improve their levels of attainment in the optional studies.
- 3.4 There are clearly proportionally more WBQ students achieving a greater number of key skills than their non involved peers, whether or not they complete or are successful in their programme. This would seem to further the claim that the WBQ is assuming its intended position in promoting the aims of the 14-19 curriculum in Wales.

4 NON-ACCREDITED ACHIEVEMENTS

- 4.1 Some of the aims and most of the broad objectives of the WBQ are related to the development of personal attitudes and skills in students and, as such, are difficult, if not impossible, to assess in the traditional manner. Indeed, some are framed in a manner which suggests they may not become apparent or appreciated by a student during or even at the completion of the programme. For these reasons the evidence related to the advantages and achievements of students gained through involvement in Diploma programme is necessarily subjective and a reflection of the opinions of participating students and staff. However, such has been the frequency of claimed achievements by participants that the evidence of the influence of the WBQ in influencing attitudes and skills has become extremely persuasive. Evidence still being collected and analysed from Higher Education students who were awarded the Diploma in 2005, as well as from employers, parents and HE tutors involved with WBQ students, will add to the emerging picture of the impact of the WBQ programme on the attitudes and skills of participating students.
- 4.2 From formal meetings with students in both the first and second cohorts there has been a consistent majority of those interviewed claiming a greater confidence through acquisition of personal and learning skills through participation in the WBQ programme. The opportunity to develop and practice skills, particularly those of communication, in 'real' situations were mentioned in number of centres with frequent appreciative reference to participation in group enterprise projects, public presentations and the encouragement to assume greater responsibility for one's own learning. Teaching staff in a majority of centres similarly considered that there were wider benefits to engagement in a WBQ programme than evident through the usual analysis of the published results. They cited improved group identity, heightened self esteem, greater maturity and the acquisition of a broader experience as some of the non-quantifiable benefits gained by students through the WBQ programme. A frequently mentioned aspect in which this latter characteristic manifested itself was through the completion of the personal statements on the UCAS application for HE. Many centres claimed a perceptible improvement in the confidence of students not only in identifying those activities in which they had been involved but also in the ability to express them in the statement.

5 PROGRESSION AND RETENTION

- 5.1 It is undoubtedly far too early in the project to formulate firm conclusions relating to either of these issues. Progression can relate to a student's entrance to a WBQ programme, procedure through the course of study and then move on from the qualification to the next stage of their educational or working life. The first two of these have been addressed in more detail in parallel themed reports, in particular those on Marketing & Promotion and Teaching & Learning. However, from the information in this paper on prior experience and with the advent of a Foundation level qualification it may be that centres will be able to be more attentive to the appropriate level of WBQ programme given knowledge of a student's level of existing attainment. Although a student's previous experience is generally known to a centre when embarking on a WBQ course there is reportedly no guarantee of this information being readily available when a young person changes learning institutions at 16, a matter of concern to some colleges. It was encouraging to note that the progression from an Intermediate programme to Advanced was successfully achieved by 6.4% of the 2005 entry achieving the Advanced Diploma after completing the Intermediate qualification the previous summer or in March 2005. It will be of interest to note the future progression of students from a Foundation level to Intermediate especially if the former is widely adopted at the 14-16 stage. As mentioned in the previous section, further work is currently underway to gauge the impact of WBQ on students progressing to HE and into work.
- 5.2 Although retention is a major aim of the WBQ there is, as mentioned earlier, no firm evidence at this comparatively early stage, other than at an anecdotal level, to suggest that it is having an impact to 'widen participation, promote access and encourage completion in post-16 education.' This is, however, a goal to which the majority of pilot centres have claimed to subscribe to as a realistic ambition achievable through participation in the WBQ.

6 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

- 6.1 The full spectrum of achievements by students following a WBQ programme is inadequately represented by a traditional statistical analysis based on the proportion of those actually attaining success in the award of a Diploma.
- 6.2 Data at this stage on students completing full Diploma programmes is inevitably limited (though increasing with every award). Accordingly, any suppositions concerning causal factors and conclusions are necessarily tentative.
- 6.3 Factors occurring during the considerable interval between registration and entry for the WBQ contributed towards some misleading confusion about student success rates in attaining Diploma awards in 2005.
- 6.4 Many factors within the control of schools and colleges which resulted in students not completing their WBQ programme in 2005 are being addressed by most centres which, if successful, should result in more meaningful data being available from future cohorts of students.
- 6.5 Assuming that on entry a student is considered capable of successfully completing a level 3 course of study, then caution should be exercised in attributing non-completion of a WBQ programme to levels of prior achievement alone.
- 6.6 There was a notable advance in level 2 attainment by successful Intermediate Diploma students given their generally modest prior achievements.

- 6.7 The attainments of students who failed to complete or acquire the required standard for a WBQ award but were successful in other 'existing qualifications' suggest that the intended broad objective of the WBQ model in safeguarding the interests of candidates is realistic and achievable.
- 6.8 It is probable that there are proportionally more WBQ students achieving a greater number of key skills whether or not they complete or are successful in their programme.
- 6.9 A majority of students in cohorts 1 and 2 claimed in formal interviews a greater confidence through personal and learning skills through participation in the WBQ programme.
- 6.10 No firm evidence, other than at an anecdotal level, has emerged at this comparatively early stage in the project to formulate firm conclusions relating to either progression or retention.

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