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# Relationships between the Welsh Baccalaureate Advanced Diploma and Higher Education

Research Summary

Social research

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## Summary

1. The development and successful implementation of the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification (WBQ) represents one of the principal ways in which, following parliamentary devolution in 1999, Wales has developed its response to UK and international debates about the most effective ways of preparing young people for higher education.
  2. The WBQ was introduced in September 2003 as a pilot scheme and has since been rolled out across a significant number of schools and FE
  3. The essential rationale here is that focussed attention on skills and social development through the Core significantly improves the opportunities for young people to prepare effectively for progression to further and higher education and for entry to the labour market.
- distinctive approach to the organisation of the curriculum (and associated assessment), combining significant elements of general and/or vocational education (the Options, comprising existing qualifications) with the development of key skills, research/analysis through the Individual Investigation, knowledge of Wales' culture and its place in Europe and the wider world and wider social and work related competences (the Core, comprising bespoke provision for the WBQ).

Dadansoddi ar gyfer Polisi



Analysis for Policy

4. In June 2012 the Wales Institute of Social & Economic Research, Data & Methods (WISERD) was awarded the contract to undertake a research project in to the relationship between the Welsh Baccalaureate Advanced Diploma and Higher Education for the Welsh Government.
  - Which elements of the Welsh Baccalaureate Advanced Diploma are most/least useful to learners in helping them to adapt to HE?
  - Is the Welsh Baccalaureate Advanced Diploma a hindrance or enhancer of performance in HE?
  - Is the Welsh Baccalaureate Advanced Diploma a driver for academic success?
  - Are there ways in which the requirements of the Welsh Baccalaureate Advanced Diploma can be adjusted to make the qualification more suitable in preparing learners for HE?
  - What are the implications of any suggested/planned changes to the Welsh Baccalaureate Advanced Diploma?
5. This report is concerned with one key aspect of the WBQ: namely, its effectiveness in preparing young people for higher education (HE). Therefore, it is concerned only with the WBQ Advanced Diploma (for which the Options are defined in terms of A-levels or equivalent qualifications).
6. The main aim of this evaluation is, therefore: To examine the relationship between the Welsh Baccalaureate Advanced Diploma and performance in HE, using robust social research techniques. Specifically, six questions were identified for the evaluation to address:
  - Does completing the Welsh Baccalaureate Advanced Diploma prepare students for the demands of HE?
7. The evaluation uses a mixed methods design, incorporating a quantitative element based on existing large-scale datasets and a qualitative element that provides more detailed insights from 25 school students undertaking the WBQ in three school sixth-forms from across south Wales, 37

university students who achieved the WBQ and are now studying at three different types of universities in Wales, the WBQ coordinators from the three school sixth-form case study settings, and 12 staff members (admissions tutors, course directors, admissions managers) from the three university case study settings.

8. The report is divided into seven chapters. Following the introduction to the report, it outlines the research design and methodology for the evaluation. Chapter 3 then briefly outlines some background information relating to the WBQ, including the number of students taking the WBQ. Chapters 4-6 present the main findings from the evaluation, combining both statistical and qualitative data analyses. These findings are divided into three elements: university participation; progress and outcomes in University; and the experiences of the WBQ amongst university staff and managers. As the report demonstrates, the WBQ and access to and progress at university are inextricably linked. Hence, the concluding chapter draws together a number of

conclusions and discusses the implications of the evaluation for the WBQ.

9. The evaluation reports two key, but interrelated, findings. The first is that there is strong evidence to suggest that the WBQ is enormously valuable in helping students to enter higher education. This benefit would appear to be largely due to the weighting given to the Core component of the WBQ as the equivalent of an additional A-level qualification (at grade A) for (some) university admissions.
10. However, the evaluation also finds evidence to suggest that students with the WBQ Core find they are less likely to achieve a 'good' degree result than equivalent students without the WBQ Core, once they are at university.
11. The report argues that these two findings may be related. Having the WBQ seems to improve the probability of getting in to university, all other things being equal; but this advantage seems to come at the expense of successful university outcomes.
12. However, the report also suggests that these relationships differ

somewhat, depending on the nature of the students. Critically, low-achieving students appear to have the most to gain from having the WBQ in terms of university participation. Although overall levels of HE participation for relatively high-achieving students do not appear to be affected by having the WBQ, it does confer some advantage in terms of entry to Russell Group universities.

13. Despite these mixed results, there was general support amongst staff and students in schools and universities for the WBQ and its main aims. But equally, it was acknowledged that there need to be improvements in the content and delivery of the WBQ for these benefits to be fully realised.

14. The report identifies three main areas in which the WBQ could be improved: the way in which the WBQ is promoted and delivered within centres; making the WBQ more challenging, in terms of skills and knowledge; and greater tailoring of the WBQ Core components to the particular needs of students.

15. The evaluation also found support for the introduction of grading to the WBQ. However, it was also felt that unless there were changes to the content and delivery of the WBQ within settings, the introduction of grading may have limited benefits. Similarly, within the HE sector, it was not clear what impact, if any, the introduction of grading would have on HE admissions, particularly since the WBQ is currently not included in the allocation of 'AAB unlimited places' in universities in England.

16. The report finally suggests that further and continuous monitoring and analysis is required in order to understand fully the relationships between the WBQ and university participation and progress. This is particularly important, as over time there will be improved data for more detailed analysis and increasing numbers of students in university who have the WBQ.

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