

## The English Baccalaureate

The concept of the 'English Baccalaureate', a new group award to be used as an additional indicator in KS4 performance tables, was introduced in the November 2010 Education White Paper 'The Importance of Teaching'. The English Baccalaureate ('Ebac') will recognize A\* to C passes at GCSE or iGCSE in five subject areas; English, Maths, Science, Humanities and Languages.

The Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove is thus using the big lever of accountability to drive curriculum and classroom reform. With the Ebac, Michael Gove can shape what pupils are taught. It will probably be much more influential than the current national curriculum review, which can be ignored by academies.

Further details listing which qualifications will be counted for each subject are now available in a [Statement of Intent 2010 Addendum notice](#), on the Department for Education's website.

The new indicator came into effect for the 2010 School Performance Tables which were published in January 2011. In term of any future changes to the definition of the English Baccalaureate, the Government notice states: "We will review the precise definition of the EBacc for the 2011 Tables, but wouldn't expect to remove any of the qualifications identified for the 2010 Tables".

The 'Ebac' comes in against a background of supposed retreat from traditional academic subjects in many schools. Under the previous government, some vocational GCSEs were given parity with academic courses. The popularity of these subjects soared in schools as they did in colleges. In 2004, about 15,000 non-academic qualifications were taken in schools but by 2010 this had risen to about 575,000. Ministers hope the 'Ebac' - a KS4 performance measure wrapped around a narrow range of traditional subjects - will encourage schools to enter their pupils for traditional subjects rather than allegedly 'softer' alternatives such as media studies and sports science.

## Comment and criticism on the Ebac

The retrospective introduction of the 'Ebac' cause widespread controversy in the schools sector. Only 15.6% of pupils gained it; less than 4% of pupils on free school meals achieved it; at first, before the iGCSE was hastily added, no public school pupils gained it (they took the 'harder' iGCSE).

Critics have argued that:

- The choice of subjects is very restrictive - the omission of the Arts, RE, and Design Technology are key examples.
- Consequently, the Ebac restricts pupil choice. For example, in a Church of England or Catholic school, RE would be compulsory to GCSE level. To achieve the Ebac in such a school, pupils would have to study two humanities, cutting down the time available for a more rounded set of options, which might include arts or technology subjects for example.
- The method of examination is very restrictive, with its insistence on GCSE. Whilst some vocational qualifications may have been over-valued, there are many rigorous vocational qualifications that students value and are engaged with, for example vocational languages (either Business or NVQ languages), demanding qualifications that would be of great use to students who wanted to use their languages in an immediate occupational context.
- The range of areas covered is very restrictive, and the 'Ebac' is not, categorically, a baccalaureate. Other international comparators require, for example, extended projects, civic participation and enterprise skills to be a part of the award. Many secondary heads would want the same opportunities for their students.
- The Ebac appears to re-establish the false dichotomy of "knowledge versus skills", with a strong emphasis on valuing the former over the latter when in fact both are important. This is not likely to promote well-rounded, independent learners.

The House of Commons Education Select Committee recently held evidence sessions on the 'Ebac' <sup>1</sup>. Andrew Chubb, principal of Archbishop Sentamu Academy in Kingston-upon-Hull, gave strong critical evidence against the 'Ebac', as does his blog:

"Archbishop Sentamu academy deplores the narrow focus of the proposed English baccalaureate. This reform has been rushed though, not thought through.

It is a straitjacket that will constrain student potential, rather than a structure which will promote broad achievement.

It caters for the interests of the few, at the expense of recognising the achievements of the many.

As an academy, we will therefore be developing our own range of baccalaureates, catering for our students' individual and personal interests and aptitudes."

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/education-committee/news/english-baccalaureate-oral-evidence-session/>

Chubb's stance has gained considerable traction amongst secondary heads.

## UCU comment on the Ebac

As a consequence of the above factors, UCU believes that the Ebac is of no value whatsoever as a measure of pupil performance. Whilst the particular combination of subjects chosen would suit the needs of some students, probably a small minority, it would not engage the majority and is therefore not suitable as a general measure of pupil performance, especially as the pre-existing system already had robust performance measures in place for the achievement of A\*-C in English and Maths.

UCU believes that 'failure' to achieve the Ebac is largely irrelevant to the majority of students yet by creating a de-facto new schools metric there is a very real danger that the majority of students in the country will be labelled exactly that.

Whilst there is no requirement for students to follow an Ebac, already schools across the country are altering their curricula for students in Year 11 just to meet what is widely perceived as a new target (a practice which the White Paper itself condemned when referring to schools who 'ramped up' the number of vocational qualifications purely for league table purposes). Music, Religious Education (RE) and Art and Design have been particularly affected by their exclusion from this new performance measure:

- In a survey by the National Association of Music Teachers, 60 per cent of respondents said their departments had already been adversely affected by the EBac. Music teachers in 57 out of 95 schools said their schools plan to reduce opportunities to study music from this September.
- The National Association of Teachers of Religious Education polled almost 800 schools and found that nearly one in three secondary schools was planning to cut time spent teaching RE as a result of the EBac.
- The National Society for Education in Art and Design (NSEAD) polled over 100 teachers. Over 60% of art teachers told NSEAD they thought fewer pupils would start Art GCSE courses this autumn because of the introduction of the EBac. John Steers, general secretary of the society, said it felt as if the government had launched an "assault" on art and design. "Clearly the ministers don't value the subjects... ..It is particularly strange because the creative industries employ so many British people."

## Impact on Initial Teacher Education

As the 'Ebac' has pushed many schools into redesigning their curriculum, it has and will have an increasing impact on demand for teachers of subjects *not* included in the 'Ebac'. For example, Design and Technology is currently part of the national curriculum, hence a widespread school curriculum offer, but it does not 'count' in the 'Ebac'. Demand for RE teachers will similarly decline as schools respond to both league table pressures from the

DfE and from parental misapprehension that the 'Ebac' is a 'new qualification' that they want their children to undertake.

These policies have already had an impact on UCU members in HE Initial Teacher Education departments.<sup>2</sup> A large teacher education university provider which in part grew from a teacher training college has announced that it wants both significant redundancies and changed academic roles in its Education Department, citing the impact of the Browne Review, the CSR and 'The Importance of Teaching: Schools' white paper, specifically the significant changes to the way in which teachers will be trained – predominantly 'on the job' in schools rather than an HEI/schools partnership.

These aspects of government policy were coupled with the longer term intentions contained in the Schools White Paper and the introduction of the 'Ebac' performance measure. The institution claimed that these policy intentions are now 'fixed' and will be followed through, resulting in the University's anticipation that from September 2012 no new undergraduate QTS provision will be funded. These institutional assumptions have led to the university demanding considerable redundancies across the education faculty.

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<sup>2</sup> The impact of Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove's policies is critically examined in the UCU briefing 'HE based Initial Teacher Education', April 2011, at:

<http://www.ucu.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=5480>