

The English Baccalaureate

ASCL evidence to the Education Select Committee

Introduction

- 1 ASCL has over 15,000 members working in leadership roles in schools and colleges which have students in the 11 to 19 age range. All our members working in England have therefore been affected by the introduction of the English baccalaureate (E-bac). ASCL has rarely received such a high level of communication from members expressing concern and dismay about a government initiative.
- 2 The evidence below has been discussed by ASCL Council and is based on the views and experiences of school and college leaders. They are not of one mind about the concept of the E-bac, but they are united in expressing their anger about its hasty introduction without any consultation, and by the use of performance indicators to push ill-thought through curriculum change. There is also considerable annoyance at the uncertainty about the details of the measure, and at learning about it from the media without having any clear information about how it would be implemented. Communication with school and college leaders about changes which they were expected to implement was insufficient, and too late.
- 3 On the other hand, our members are very interested in taking part in a debate on the development of a genuine baccalaureate for England that would ensure that all students received a well-rounded education in preparation for life and work in the twenty-first century. ASCL has long argued for just such an award. But education history is littered with examples of awards and qualifications which have been introduced too hastily, without proper consultation and discussion, and which then disadvantage those students who have been used as guinea pigs. Our young people should not be used in this way as they only have one experience of the secondary school system and the qualifications which they gain will stay with them for life.
- 4 The E-bac is not a qualification, despite its name, but a performance indicator. And all performance measures are likely to have perverse consequences; they therefore need to be carefully considered before introduction. ASCL recognises that recent measures have had an undue effect on the curriculum for some students and would have been happy to contribute to a discussion of how to avoid such perverse incentives in the future.
- 5 The E-bac is not a qualification or award for students and therefore offers them no benefits. As a performance measure, it threatens to introduce negative consequences for learners, if schools believe that they have to alter their curriculum and push young people into changing their choices in order to meet the government's preferred performance measure.

The purpose and benefits of the E-bac and its value as a measure of pupil and school performance

- 6 When the Secretary of State first spoke about the E-bac, he described it as a performance measure and a certificate for pupils. It has since become clear that no planning had been done on the introduction of a certificate for young people and no time scale for its introduction has been announced. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how such a certificate could be produced since the relevant qualifications will have been achieved through different awarding organisations, possibly at different times, and there is currently no process for the collation of awards to individual 16 year olds. If such a certificate were to be introduced a costly process (such as that introduced for the awarding of the diploma) would be needed.

- 7 Since there seems to have been no discussion with higher education institutions or employers to find out whether this would be a certificate or even combination of subjects which they would value, it is clear that the measure has no particular value for students but is simply a school performance measure.
- 8 It would appear that the E-bac was introduced as a school performance measure in order to nudge schools into changing their key stage 4 (KS4) curriculum. Regulations currently state that all KS4 pupils must follow the national curriculum in maths, science and English and that they have an entitlement to study a humanity subject and a modern foreign language. All students in England therefore already have the opportunity to follow the subjects included in the E-bac, but since the decision to make languages and humanities an entitlement rather than statutory subjects there has been no reason for schools to push students into choosing these subjects against their will; indeed many parents have resisted such moves by schools. Schools have made clear to students through their information, advice and guidance programmes that highly selective universities and employers would be looking for a range of GCSE results at very high grades and, in our members' experience, provided that students have English, maths and science, universities are more interested in the students gaining a number of GCSEs at A or A* than in the specific subjects. Some medical schools even advise students to drop a subject if they expect only to gain a grade B. ASCL shares the concern about the smaller number of students taking a modern language but does not believe that this measure will strengthen languages overall as it encourages schools to drop language courses other than GCSEs and focus their language teaching on a smaller number of students.
- 9 Schools were rightly angry to be told that for their 2010 results they would be judged on criteria which were not known in advance and which depended on the choices made by their students in 2008 or by the school's specialism. Not surprisingly, schools specialising in languages averaged 30.9% in the E-bac table while for schools specialising in maths and computing the figure was 16.5%.
- 10 So the E-bac is a measure that provides information about student choice in 2008 but tells us nothing about school performance. The rather arbitrary nature of the qualifications included exacerbates the problem. To take just one example, it was not possible to foresee in 2008 that a Cambridge certificate in French (which does not follow the national curriculum programme of study) would be considered more valid than a GCSE in Applied French.
- 11 ASCL can see no benefits to students in the current arrangements for the E-bac. They do not receive a certificate nor has any university or employer stated that possession of this list of subjects at grade C or above will be an entrance requirement.

The choice of subjects in the E-bac

- 12 The range of subjects included in the E-bac, either as a genuine qualification or a performance measure, is extremely narrow and reflects the needs of the past rather than the present. There are a number of specific anomalies which are of concern: the omission of religious studies, humanities, classical civilisation, economics, and business studies from the 'humanity' category being the most obvious.
- 13 If the intention really is to create an English baccalaureate rather than simply a performance measure then we would argue that this is not a baccalaureate as understood internationally. The term is usually taken to be an award which provides evidence that a student has followed a broad and balanced education, including both basic subjects (such as maths, science, their own language and a second language) and then a range of other options which would include subjects representing the arts and technology as well as the humanities. A baccalaureate usually also demonstrates achievement in both knowledge and skills in a

range of contexts, both academic and practical, giving credit for learning in class and in the wider community.

- 14 The omission of subjects in the areas of creative media and the arts, design, technology, information technology, engineering and business is particularly worrying to our members since they are aware that many young people are intending to take up careers in these areas of high demand. Students need to sample these subjects at KS4 so that they can decide whether to pursue further study in them post-16.

The implications of the E-bac for young people, schools and employers

- 15 ASCL has already heard from many school leaders that they feel obliged to change their curriculum plan for KS4 from September 2011 as a response to the introduction of this performance measure. Many are taking this step, not because they feel that it is in the best interests of the students, but because they are worried that in future their school will be judged on this measure by Ofsted and others and found wanting. Schools have become used to such a culture in recent years and are angry that they are having to make these decisions now about the curriculum when the government has not yet made clear its future intentions in terms of performance judgements.
- 16 Students in year 9 (Y9) aged 13 and 14 are currently engaged in choosing their options and therefore decisions have to be made quickly. In some schools parents and governors, who are also unclear about the government's intentions and the nature of the E-bac, have put pressure on school leaders to change the curriculum. Some parents are under the impression that in future students will have to have the E-bac in order to progress to university. ASCL has had no indication from universities that this is likely to be the case nor is it clear that they were consulted about the E-bac measure.
- 17 Some school leaders are so concerned about improving their performance in the E-bac measure before future inspections that they have felt it necessary to encourage Y10 students to change the GCSE subjects which they have already been studying for six months. Examples are students being pressed to take part in after school sessions for GCSE history and geography, and students studying two modern languages being asked to drop one and take geography instead.
- 18 Where Y9 students do move towards E-bac subjects and away from those not included (whether because of school, parental or media pressure) schools will have to change their staffing structure for September 2011. This is not easy to do for a variety of reasons: the timescale for redundancy processes and the lack of high quality language teachers being the most significant.
- 19 There is already evidence from subject association surveys that music, art and business studies teachers are being warned of reductions in their number to enable the employment of more humanities and language teachers. Even leaving aside its rights or wrongs, any change to the curriculum needs careful introduction over time, especially when resources are scarce. There are also a curriculum review and a review of vocational qualifications under way, which are likely to influence curriculum decisions made by schools and colleges. It is surprising that the E-bac was introduced in such haste before the outcomes of these two reviews are known. Schools are likely to be making costly changes to their staffing structures which they may have to alter again in line with future proposals. If Britain is to compete with the best in the world, we need coherent education policies not piecemeal changes of this sort.
- 20 For all of these reasons, but above all in the interests of the students, ASCL has advised its members against hasty change. However, given the punitive culture of accountability and the uncertainty of future developments in this area it is not surprising that school leaders and

governing bodies feel threatened by yet another performance measure and feel that they have to take whatever steps they can to improve their statistics.

- 21 ASCL believes that young people currently in Y9 and Y10 (and in subsequent years if this measure is maintained) will be disadvantaged by being pushed into option choices which are not based on impartial information, advice and guidance (IAG), but on the school's need to meet a performance target. One of our members recently wrote "The changes we made to our KS4 curriculum have increased the flexibility available to us, ensuring a personalised curriculum pathway for each and every one of our students. This focus has increased the range of learning opportunities open to our young people and presented them with positive options where success and progression are achievable. The introduction of the E-bac, in which students will be measured on whether they achieve a set of very narrowly defined subjects, is a real step backwards."

International comparators for the E-bac

- 22 We are not aware that other countries use a similar accountability measure but would welcome a genuine debate about a possible move towards an English baccalaureate as an overarching award. There are many international examples of baccalaureates which provide such awards. Most of these ensure that young people gain knowledge and understanding as well as skills and attitudes through a broad and balanced curriculum which includes the main traditions of learning whilst also being future orientated. Our young people deserve to have a baccalaureate which compares favourably to those on offer elsewhere.
- 23 As an over-arching qualification, the E-bac is seriously wanting. It is too narrow in its scope, fails to include the arts or technology and over emphasises one approach to learning. It has not been piloted, or undergone any of the tests that would be required of a new qualification.

Conclusion

- 24 ASCL proposes that, if there is a genuine desire to ensure that our young people can compete with those from other countries, we should look carefully at the structure of 14-19 education in those countries which appear to be performing at a very high level and consider and compare their awards and qualifications before making hasty changes to our own. Above all, our young people should no longer be subject to change which cannot be sustained and which is damaging to their future prospects.
- 25 ASCL is therefore involved in the *Build a Better Bac* campaign and will be included in the joint submission from that group.
- 26 ASCL is willing to be engage in any discussion aimed at improving the education of our young people, and trusts that it and its members will be fully consulted before further changes to the curriculum or the accountability regime are introduced.