

A review of the design and assessment model of the Skills Challenge Certificate and its place within the Welsh Baccalaureate

Executive Summary

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of Qualifications Wales.

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Executive Summary

1. In January 2017, Wavehill Ltd and Dr Caroline Daly of University College London, Institute of Education (UCL, IOE) were commissioned by Qualifications Wales to undertake a review of the design and assessment model of the Skills Challenge Certificate (SCC) and its place within the Welsh Baccalaureate (Welsh Bacc).
2. In 2015, a new Welsh Bacc was introduced. The Welsh Bacc is a framework of qualifications that prepares learners between the ages of 14 -19 for employability and further and higher education. There are four forms of the Welsh Bacc at three different levels. At the heart of each Welsh Bacc is a new and innovative, skills-based qualification called the Skills Challenge Certificate.
3. There are four SCC qualifications, one for each Welsh Bacc. Each SCC follows a common structure, which includes four components: the Individual Project, the Enterprise and Employability Challenge, the Global Citizenship Challenge, and the Community Challenge. Collectively, the four components aim to enable learners to develop seven skills needed for education, employment and life. These are referred to as the seven essential and employability skills.
4. This work incorporated a desk-based review of the core materials that support the delivery of the SCC, as well as Qualifications Wales' initial review of the implementation of the SCC and Welsh Bacc (2016). Alongside the desk-based review, Wavehill conducted focus groups with learners from a sample of schools and Further Education (FE) colleges (centres) across Wales, as well as interviews with teachers, lecturers, and Welsh Bacc coordinators.

Findings from the desk-based review

5. The desk-based review focussed on the design and assessment model of the SCC qualifications and their place within the Welsh Bacc. It is important to note that any independent analysis of a qualification's design is likely to identify aspects that could be improved. It was more likely for this review, which looked at the design of a new and innovative skills-based qualification (SCC), and its place within a framework (Welsh Bacc) of qualifications.
6. The desk-based review identified two underlying challenges that impact on the overall coherence of the SCC:
 - (a) Designing to assess skills through 'real world learning' experiences – the SCC was designed to be delivered alongside the broader curriculum with the intention that learners would develop the seven essential and employability skills across all areas of their studies. These were then to be assessed through the components of the SCC. This is complex to manage and requires extensive curriculum coordination within centres, which may have been under-estimated.

(b) Specialist vs generic knowledge - the absence of specialist SCC teachers, combined with the presentation of the seven essential and employability skills as easy to develop and assess, may undermine the perceived value of the SCC qualifications when compared to other qualifications.

7. In addition to these underlying challenges, the report reviews the purpose, structure, content, assessment model and grading model of the SCC.

Purpose

8. There is a clear vision and purpose for the Welsh Bacc, the SCC and each component of the SCC (i.e. the Individual Project and the three Challenges). There is a clear intention for learners to experience different types of learning and to have a greater say in what they study and how. The Challenges and Individual Project provide opportunities for learners to develop highly relevant skills within authentic contexts that are relevant to their future study and employment needs.

Structure

9. The design of the SCC is complex. There are four forms of the SCC (i.e. KS4, Post-16 Foundation, Post-16 National and Advanced) that span learning from ages 14-19. Each form of the SCC develops and assesses the same seven essential and employability skills in a similar way. As a result, there is repetition in content, learning outcomes, methods of assessment and assessment criteria across each form. This leads to a lack of clarity about progression.

Content

10. The content of the SCC is highly relevant to developing the required skills. Each Challenge is designed to meet 'real world' needs and to take place within authentic work and community contexts. However, questions are raised about how specific skills are aligned with each Challenge.
11. There is also repetition across the four components of the SCC. Although each component has a clear purpose as a discrete element, the benefits of studying all three Challenges, as opposed to fewer in a more consolidated and focused way, are not clear.

Assessment

12. Many demands are made of the assessment model, which has led to complex assessment structures. Each of the seven essential and employability skills are assessed to differing degrees, with some being over assessed.
13. The learning outcomes and assessment criteria are not always aligned, and the assessment criteria lacks specificity. As a result, it is not always clear how to differentiate between performance bands when assessing learners' work.

14. The language used in the grading model is confusing. There is a lack of coherence between the grades awarded to each component of the SCC, and the final grade awarded to the SCC qualification.

Findings from the engagement with learners and teachers

15. The field research was designed to capture the views of learners and teachers about their experiences of the SCC. Four high-level themes emerged from the fieldwork: understanding of the SCC and the Welsh Bacc, experience of the SCC, skills developed through the SCC and support from teachers, family and the community.

Learner and teacher understanding of the Skills Challenge Certificate and the Welsh Baccalaureate

16. In general, teachers that were interviewed felt that they had a good understanding of the design of both the SCC and the Welsh Bacc. However, they reported finding it a challenge to explain to learners, other teachers and parents, and felt that teachers not directly involved, and in some cases, senior management, did not always understand it.
17. A number of learners in the focus groups felt that they did not fully understand the SCC. Learners demonstrated particular confusion about the way in which the SCC is assessed, including how the assessment criteria are applied to their work, how each component is graded and how the marks for each component of the SCC contribute to their overall grade.
18. Teachers reported that the documentation to support the delivery of the SCC is not always clear and consistent, leading to difficulties in implementation. Many learners also pointed towards what they perceived to be a lack of consistent information and messaging about the SCC.

Learner and teacher experience of the Skills Challenge Certificate

19. Learners and teachers reported many rewarding elements of the SCC. There were many instances where learners told us that they had enjoyed specific aspects of the SCC, such as going out into the community or learning business skills. Many teachers commented on the successes of individual learners who had excelled in their work, particularly in areas that they found challenging.

20. Many teachers who were interviewed stated that they enjoy delivering the SCC and find it professionally rewarding. They were all positive about the principles of the SCC and reported that to some extent it is meeting its defined purpose, but many felt that it needs refining and streamlining to make it clearer and more manageable. A number commented that it is not always clear how the skills are built upon through each of the components of the SCC, and that there is too much repetition across each component, and level, of the SCC. Many learners suggested that while the amount of time needed to complete the SCC is quite high, the level of challenge is appropriate.
21. Many teachers reported facing challenges in assessing learners' work due to the complexity of the assessment model. They felt that the assessment criteria are too generic and lack clarity and precision. The majority also felt that the volume of assessment is too high and reported that they spend a disproportionate amount of time assessing and standardising learners' work.
22. All teachers interviewed were positive about the opportunities for sharing expertise and supporting each other but identified a need for more ongoing support for teachers and centres.

Skills developed through the Skills Challenge Certificate

23. Learners and teachers identified tangible progression in learning gained through the SCC that are not available in other subjects, such as interpersonal communication skills, public speaking, leadership skills, and financial skills. These represent real gains for many learners and reflect the vision and purpose of the SCC.
24. Most teacher interviewees thought that the seven essential and employability skills embedded in the SCC prepared learners well for the world of work and further or higher education.

Support from teachers, family and the community

25. One of the characteristics of the SCC, particularly the Individual Project, is that it encourages independent learning. In most cases, learners reported being able to find guidance and support from teachers and felt that they had gained skills from seeking out this support for their work. However, other learners felt that they had not received enough guidance or noted that they had not been able to find teachers with expertise in their chosen subject-area.
26. There doesn't appear to be a particularly high or noteworthy level of discussion about the SCC between learners and their families, and learners reported that their families do not know much about the SCC.

27. Many teachers commented that they have very good links with local employers. However, there remains scope to develop these links further to help support delivery of the SCC.
28. It is important to note that participants in the fieldwork represent a sample of all teachers and learners currently teaching or studying the SCC. Participants were only asked about their experience of the SCC, and how it fits within the Welsh Bacc framework, they were not asked about their experience of other qualifications. It is therefore not possible to draw inferences about other qualifications

Recommendations

29. The desk-based review and engagement with teachers and learners confirms that the principles of the Welsh Bacc and SCC are strong and relevant, and that learners are developing skills that are beneficial to their future. As a result, we strongly advise that the SCC is retained and revised to build on its strengths and to reduce its complexity.
30. The SCC curriculum and assessment design would benefit from considering the principles of 'constructive alignment' (Biggs, 2003). Constructive alignment is concerned with ensuring the desired learning outcomes of a programme are clear and used as the foundation for designing the curriculum and forms of assessment. The aim is for a completely coherent relationship between what is to be learned, how it is learned and how it is assessed.
31. We make a series of eight recommendations to support stakeholders in developing the SCC in the future.

Recommendation 1: Qualifications Wales to establish a process to review the recommendations of the report so that any developments are implemented in a considered and timely manner and involve key stakeholders. Any developments must be communicated in a clear, comprehensive and consistent manner.

Recommendation 2: Qualifications Wales, WJEC and Welsh Government to review the information available about the SCC and the Welsh Bacc to ensure that it is clear, consistent and accessible. The review should include:

- (a) the regulatory design principles, qualification specifications, delivery handbook, administration handbook, and code of practice;
- (b) how information about the SCC and the Welsh Bacc can be tailored more effectively to learners and their families.

Recommendation 3: Qualifications Wales, working with stakeholders, to increase awareness and understanding of the SCC and the Welsh Bacc among teachers, senior leaders and support staff.

Recommendation 4: WJEC, with support from Qualifications Wales, to continue to offer Continuous Professional Development (CPD) and training for all staff involved in the delivery of the SCC.

Recommendation 5: Welsh Government to consider whether initial teacher education (ITE) could help to prepare teachers for developing and assessing the skills included in the SCC.

Recommendation 6: Qualifications Wales to review the design of the SCC, including its structure and content. This should consider the principles of Constructive Alignment and include:

- (a) Reviewing the need for three Challenges with overlapping Learning Objectives, alongside the Individual Project. If appropriate, identify where the number of Challenges could be reduced by analysing the synergies between them. For example, Qualifications Wales could consider:
 - i. removing the Community Challenge and reallocating the skills 'Planning and Organisation' and 'Personal Effectiveness' to the Enterprise and Employability Challenge where they clearly support the learning aims;
 - ii. the extent to which the aims of the Challenges and the essential and employability skills could be included and assessed within the Individual Project.
- (b) Considering the case for introducing one SCC qualification at Post-16 spanning Foundation and National levels.
- (c) Reviewing whether literacy and numeracy should continue to be assessed in the SCC at Post-16.
- (d) Reviewing the allocation of GLH and weighting attributed to each component.
- (e) Reviewing the examples of appropriate Challenges offered in the Specifications at KS4 and Post 16 Foundation and National levels to achieve greater consistency and clearer opportunities for progression.
- (f) Exploring the opportunities for increasing the assessment of Digital Literacy. For example, as part of 'raising awareness methods' within the Global Citizenship Challenge.
- (g) Considering how the Individual Project might be further improved, for example by:
 - i. revising the word length of the written report and the purpose for the artefact;
 - ii. exploring the potential to increase opportunities for learners to develop Digital Literacy skills;
 - iii. exploring opportunities to assess Creativity and Innovation skills;
 - iv. exploring how it can be better integrated into the curriculum.

Recommendation 7: WJEC to consider how the assessment and grading model could be made clearer for the Challenges and the Individual Project at all levels. This should include:

- (a) Reviewing the assessment criteria to look at:
 - i. how assessment criteria align with the learning outcomes;
 - ii. developing better quality, clearer assessment criteria;
 - iii. introducing consistent features in the criteria that provide common indicators of attainment at Foundation and National levels;
 - iv. rationalising the over-complex sets of marks, bands, grades and levels and introducing one set of criteria that can be applied across all learners at Foundation and National levels, modelled on the current KS4 matrix.
- (b) Reviewing ways in which the assessment model can be made more transparent so that learners understand what is expected for each performance band.
- (c) Considering how the reliability of assessing group work within the Challenges can be strengthened.

Recommendation 8: Qualifications Wales to review the Welsh Bacc framework to:

- (a) Consider the viability of the SCC (or revised components of the SCC) as a discrete qualification, independent of the Welsh Bacc.
- (b) Consider whether the Welsh Bacc should continue as a composite award.

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