

# Manchester baccalaureate

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The influx of Tory doctrines into the education system has been sporadic since their return to power in 2010, and centred on their idea of improving education for the masses by getting the state system to impersonate the education of the few in the private sector. The problem has been, unfortunately, that the money and support available in the private sector is not mirrored in the state system, which has seen a large real-terms cut in government spending.

In 2010, the Government launched its great education leveller, the English Baccalaureate (EBacc), intended to ensure that students would study a set number of subjects from a list - all academic of course - provided by Russell Group universities. No attention was paid to the arts or to the technical sides of education, thereby alienating a whole raft of students whose abilities lay within their creative minds. The Government also intended the EBacc as a further way of measuring a school's 'success' - ie as another league table in which schools compete against each other, rather than focusing on providing what is best for the student.

The EBacc comprises five routes or pillars: English, Mathematics, Science, Humanities and Languages. Within each there is a partial choice, although except in maths the majority of choices fall within the language category. Many see the choices as too narrow, and although many students do take up to five subjects in the suite of qualifications, many also find that their choices are limited by the lack of specialist teachers, especially in languages and some areas of science.

The current administration was elected on a manifesto promise that 90 per cent of students would be studying all the EBacc subjects by 2025. This is manifesto double-speak, because technically if a student is studying English or maths they are by definition studying an EBacc subject. Perhaps a real test would be how many students are studying the whole suite of subjects, which would be a long way short of the 90 per cent. Nationwide, the number of students completing the full EBacc has pretty much plateaued at 40 per cent since 2014. In some areas in the North less than 10 per cent of students gain the full suite of qualifications required to meet EBacc criteria.

If the idea of getting students to complete a certain level of education in a range of subjects is to

enable them to move into higher education or a career, why introduce at 14 an EBacc that restricts a student's choices at 16? The only pathway now is academic - which for many, especially inner-city students, is not the route for them. They want to get away from academic education and pursue a career for which they currently have no prior learning. One effect is that year in, year out we see FE colleges being used as exam factories, with thousands of students resitting maths and English and still not achieving the fabled grade four.

What is needed is to shake the education system to its core with something revolutionary, something that, rather than ineffectually mirroring the private sector, actually addresses the needs of the student and of the local employment scene.

With devolution, some powers are also devolved to the area level. So far, these area powers have not been the same as those devolved to Scotland and Wales. Scotland has always had a separate education system, while Wales has a Bacc of its own. This includes a number of qualifications along with the Skills Challenge Certificate (SCC), which involves a project and three other tests, in enterprise and employment skills, knowledge of global issues and participation in a community project. However, the uptake is not particularly large and the scheme could do with a lot more promotion.

In England, this year's Spring Statement conferred more powers on the devolved metropolitan mayoral districts of Greater Manchester and the West Midlands. Both these regions have asked for more powers in education, especially control over post-16 technical education. This has allowed the mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, to launch what he sees as the opening gambit on this journey - the Manchester Baccalaureate, or MBacc. So, what is the MBacc?

At its core are English language, maths and information technology. It also includes options: engineering; art and design, drama and music in the creative sphere; and biology, chemistry and physics in the sciences. Other options under consideration are business studies, economics, humanities; history, geography, languages, English literature and physical education.

Ears are already pricking up, as this is a more exciting bag for a student to consider at 14. Unlike the fare dished up in the EBacc, this is a fully

inclusive bag for the majority of students and also reflects Manchester as the hub of the industrial revolution and its continuing position in the world of technology. It would allow students to be encouraged by innovations that have originated in the Manchester area, for example the splitting of the atom, the first programmable computer, and the latest material, graphene, while on the creative side we have such artists as L. S. Lowry, H. Riley and Thomas Armstrong. The area also has a strong tradition in the field of drama, for example through Ben Kingsley, Albert Finney, Robert Powell and Chris Eccleston, and a world-renowned music scene, with bands like Joy Division/ New Order, Oasis, the Beegees, the Hollies, the Verve, the Happy Mondays and The Stone Roses, as well as being the home of Northern Soul. Our history is full of world firsts, including people like Engels and Marx, Emmeline Pankhurst and Anthony Burgess, organisations like the Trades Union Congress, events like the Peterloo massacre, and innovations like Inter City rail travel, the Bridgewater canal, and a pure water supply. We would have to try and work on the English literature curriculum to include the Manchester greats of Anthony Burgess, Elizabeth Gaskell, John Cooper Clark, Shaun Ryder, Tony Walsh and Morrissey. Appraising such local writers would be much more enticing to students than 19th century English novels (Gaskell excepted).

Once the students have made their selection, they would then be heading for a much wider 16+ choice. On the technical side, this could lead at 16 to T-levels/BTEC and apprenticeships - in manufacturing and engineering, finance, digital, creative and sport, to name but a few. This in turn would then lead either to an apprenticeship, a technical degree or a Higher Technical Qualification at 18, providing for students a motorway as opposed to the academic pathway offered by EBacc.

Will the Government accept it? (The plan is to launch in September 2024.) The MBacc - like the EBacc - is not a qualification, but a group of qualifications. Will schools accept it if there are no plans for a league table to encourage schools towards it? The idea is to really give students an improved chance of studying subjects that are relevant to their further education and employment prospects. However, the cost of delivering technical qualifications is another factor. Engineering is a lot more expensive to deliver than, say, maths or English.

I leave to last the biggest question of all: do we have the staff to deliver the qualifications at 16+? The massive cuts to FE have seen many staff on the technical side leave teaching for better paid employment. Unless more cash is forthcoming to the sector, this drift will continue, and FE colleges

will be slashing courses rather than growing them, especially in fields which are important to the economy overall.

I think the MBacc is a very positive and forward-looking move in education - especially as regards proper preparation for T-levels and other Level 3 qualifications. To get it going, it needs full government support, including a massive injection of cash that is invested in the tutors required to deliver this bank of qualifications, and not lost in the ivory towers of FE management structures.

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