

## **Are academies ensuring a broad and balanced curriculum?**

- *Various factors have led many academies to develop a narrow and utilitarian curriculum. Even traditional school subjects are re-framed as work preparation.*
- *A range of vocational courses is offered, but humanities, creative arts and languages are neglected.*

It is beyond the scope of this study to provide a thorough evaluation of the curriculum patterns of academies as a whole. As well as looking at the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) subjects (see the subsequent section), we have conducted case studies of four academies which rely heavily on ‘equivalent’ qualifications to boost the five or more A\*-C scores.

Academy status is, of course, not the only influence on these schools’ development. Many of the curriculum changes identified here are occurring in other schools, but they are far more likely to occur in academies because of their heavier reliance on ‘equivalents’. It is also possible that the balance of influence has shifted away from educational considerations towards business factors such as the need for an academy sponsor to demonstrate success in order to grow its academy chain. Without the influence of experienced educational advisers from the local authority, and given the strong national pressure to improve performance, it is conceivable that a competitive or commercial culture among many sponsors has exacerbated a tendency towards improving the headline statistics whatever the cost.

The problem of ‘equivalence’ was dealt with in an earlier section, in terms of:

- i) the flawed qualitative equivalence between a pass in many alternative qualifications and a C grade or above at GCSE;
- ii) the dubious quantitative equivalence of a single vocational certificate with two, four or even six GCSEs.

### *The rationale behind alternative qualifications*

These problems apply to many of the most popular ‘equivalent’ qualifications. However it may be helpful to make some distinctions:

- a) Some qualifications accredit genuinely vocational courses which are innovative in terms of school curricula at Key Stage 4. Examples include Business and Finance, Engineering, Health and Social Care and Tourism. Many were introduced as BTEC Firsts following the previous Government’s 14-19 reform.
- b) Some qualifications substitute for existing GCSE subjects, for example Art and Design, ICT, Music, Drama and Sport. In some cases the alternatives are preferred because they offer more realistic and student-friendly modes of assessment including projects fulfilling a brief or specification. In some cases the alternative certification seriously distorts what is studied.

- c) Some 'equivalent' qualifications, for example in Science or Maths, are predominantly used to provide easier accreditation for students likely to receive low grades in GCSE.

These are not hard and fast distinctions, and relate as much to how they are used as to the nature of the qualification. For example, BTEC Art and Design could be seen predominantly as vocational preparation in some schools, and in others as an easier substitute for GCSE.

### *Case studies*

For each of these four academies, we examined the range of subjects studied overall, and also looked in detail at the qualifications of a random sample of 20 pupils. In one academy, five more pupils were added because our original sample was unrepresentative of the year group.

Across all four schools, analysis shows a very strong emphasis on vocational studies and the core of English, Maths and Science, but the eclipse of humanities, creative arts, languages, and design and technology. In our sample of 85 pupils, we found that:

- i) only seven pupils had studied History or Geography, though seven pupils in one academy studied another humanities subject, Sociology
- ii) less than half our sample had studied a creative arts subject (for the majority this was BTEC First Art and Design)
- iii) languages were almost non-existent apart from nine pupils whose families were probably bilingual (Portugese, Turkish, Urdu, Dutch, Russian and Arabic). Several more obtained low-level results in Spanish 'graded tests'.
- iv) design and technology GCSE had almost disappeared, with a very small number of students opting for Food, Graphic Design or Resistant Materials.

The indication that some curriculum areas were marginalised was reinforced by looking at the entire Year 11 population of these four academies, nearly 500 students.

- i) History or Geography were taken by 12 % of these 500 students, mainly from two schools. In one academy, a single student took History and none took Geography. Nationally, 57% of students sit these subjects.
- ii) A further 11% sat Sociology, mainly from one school (6 % nationally).
- iii) Around 20 % of the 500 students sat Art and Design, Drama or Music as GCSEs and 30% in vocational versions. In one academy there was no music, and in two no drama. Nationally 44% take these subjects as GCSEs.
- iv) 14 % of students qualified in a language which was probably spoken at home (single entries in Dutch, Portuguese, Persian and Russian, for example, and small numbers in Arabic, Bengali, Spanish and Urdu). Only 8% appeared to study French or Spanish as a new language. Nationally 40% of students take languages, though predominantly French, German and Spanish.

v) Only 10% of these 500 students studied a Design and Technology subject.

Each of these academies offered several major vocational options, such as Business and Finance, Engineering, and Health and Social Care. Other subjects such as BTECs in Sports Studies or Art and Design may serve the purpose of preparation for work, or simply as replacements for well-established GCSE option subjects.

#### *Core subjects*

In terms of core subjects, the overwhelming need to secure an A\*-C in English and Maths for the 5ACemEQ scores led some of these schools to enter every student three or four times through Years 10 and 11. In one academy, numerous pupils achieving an F or G in GCSE Maths in Year 11 on their third attempt, were nevertheless awarded an A\*-C 'equivalent' because of a Mathematical Studies VRQ taken in Year 9. In all these four case study academies, students with low grades in GCSE Core Science obtained an A\*-C 'equivalent' through Applied Science.

A small number of high attainers qualified in three sciences. Most higher attaining pupils achieved English Literature alongside English.

#### *Broad and balanced?*

In conclusion, a combination of forces has led these academies towards a curriculum with a strong utilitarian leaning but with significant lack of breadth in terms of languages, creative arts and humanities.

This curriculum appears to be built round a vocational specialism and compulsory English, Maths and Science, with ICT. In some academies Religious Studies is standard. More academic students tend to study Literature in their English lessons.

Roughly half the students take a creative arts subject, though this is generally reframed as preparation for work. Languages, History and Geography are a rare addition.

Here are some typical examples of the programmes of pupils who achieved five or more A\*-Cs due to 'equivalents'. In each example, the first named BTEC normally counts as the equivalent of four A\*-C grades at GCSE, and Engineering counts as six. Other vocational certificates generally count as two A\*-C grades. Where a vocational certificate is deemed to be equivalent to multiple GCSE A\*-C grades, the number is shown in square brackets.

- BTEC Health and Social Care [4], English, Mathematical Studies (VRQ level 2), Science (2), Applied ICT [2]
- BTEC Hospitality [2], English, Maths, Applied Science, ICT, DT Graphics
- BTEC Beauty Care [4], BTEC Art and Design [2], English, English Literature, Maths, Applied Science [2]

The curriculum of higher achieving students who obtain five or more A\*-Cs by GCSE alone shows a similar functionalist orientation; a second vocational course is added rather than languages or humanities. For example:

- BTEC Business and Finance [4], BTEC Tourism [4], BTEC Art and Design [2], English, Maths, Science (2), ICT, Religious Studies
- BTEC Engineering [6], BTEC Tourism [4], English, Maths, Science (2), RE, Computer Appreciation [2]

The curriculum of lower attaining students not reaching C in English or Maths can be even more restricted:

- BTEC Sports Studies [2], English, Maths, Applied Science [2], ICT
- Applied ICT [2], Maths, Sciences (2)

In conjunction with this, we also have to consider the way the vocational style of certification affects subject content. For example, BTEC Music Studies is mainly concerned with the processes and technologies of staging events or making recordings, and with the career opportunities and roles within the music industry. It is a managerialist rather than cultural subject. Applied Science is arguably weaker than GCSE in terms of scientific content and cognitive development. In some respects this is a more restricted curriculum than that of many 1950s secondary modern schools.