

Labour's Policy Review: the third report of the independent Skills Taskforce

A response from the Sixth Form Colleges Association

David Igoe, Chief Executive, SFCA

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Introduction

The Sixth Form Colleges' Association represents, promotes and supports the interests of all 93 Sixth Form Colleges in England. At the last meeting of the SFCA's Curriculum and Quality committee (a full list of members can be found at the end of this document) the third and final report of the independent Skills Taskforce was discussed in some detail. Based on that discussion, David Igoe, SFCA's Chief Executive, has developed this response to the report. Representatives of the SFCA would welcome the opportunity to meet with Tristram Hunt and other members of the shadow education team to discuss the paper in more detail. The SFCA's Curriculum and Quality committee is also willing to act as a sounding board for future policy ideas and initiatives.

Summary

This final report of the independent Skills Taskforce has been broadly welcomed by leaders, curriculum managers and teachers in Sixth Form Colleges. We have been championing a 'baccalaureate' view of post-16 curriculum for some time and as the report acknowledges, SFCA has developed its own baccalaureate style award, the SFBacc, which endorses an approach to the curriculum which is entirely resonant and consistent with the proposals outlined by the Skills Taskforce.

In particular we agree with the central tenet of the report that the current qualification, assessment and curriculum structure lacks coherence and direction and fails to address the needs of the 'forgotten 50 per cent' who are not suited to an academic diet and pathway. We can see further merit in the proposals for a balanced curriculum which recognises the need for both 'core learning' and for broadening and enrichment coupled with relevant and effective support, advice and guidance. More specific views on the report are outlined below.

A. Mathematics and English

There will be wide support for the notion of embedding further English and Mathematics into existing A level and BTEC programmes, but much less support for any new stand-alone qualifications which would have significant resource and workforce implications. However, given the intention to grade progress in Mathematics and English as a separate component of the National Baccalaureate, then much work needs to be done on how the skills would be tracked, recorded and validated. We have some experience of this (see below).

Extending Mathematics and English beyond GCSE is not a new idea and the 'key skills' initiative introduced ten years ago which included English, Mathematics and ICT, had similar aims and intentions. Despite being a condition of funding, the programmes proved difficult to administer. They also proved unpopular with teachers and students, had very poor success rates and were subsequently abandoned. We think there were obvious reasons for this. Without HEIs and employers agreeing, in advance, to value and expect progression in English and Mathematics, there is little prospect that these programmes will be seen as having value. It is vital, therefore, that both the Baccalaureate as a whole adds value to a student's portfolio and the individual English and Mathematics elements also add value. That will not happen without HEIs (via UCAS tariffs) and employers making these qualifications a requirement for access to courses and jobs.

There is also a significant capacity issue within the FE workforce which is being recognised in the current plans to offer 'golden hellos' to aspiring Maths teachers in General FE Colleges. Sixth Form Colleges are outside the scope of that plan and, although we have a strong talent pool in English and Maths, we will need to recruit many more teachers to meet any new requirements. It would be helpful to be able to do this on a level playing field.

What remains unclear is the precise content of any English and Mathematics programmes that extend all students beyond GCSE. We suggest that awarding bodies will need to build on their current engagement with HEIs and employers to articulate what higher mathematical and English language skills would support higher education courses and what higher numeracy and literacy skills are needed to support employment. This work would provide the foundation for specifications which map the embedded skills in core programmes or provide a basis for new stand-alone qualifications.

B. The National Baccalaureate

There are currently around 2,000 students in 10 Sixth Form Colleges following programmes leading to the SFBacc award. A feature of the current profile of SFBacc students is that they are following diverse individual study programmes ranging from traditional academic A levels, to BTECs, with some students on level 2 vocational programmes.

This initiative arose out of the desire to endorse the curriculum approach found in the majority of Sixth Form Colleges which can be summarised in the phrase "subjects, skills, values, breadth". The SFBacc gives the assurance that Sixth Form

College students emerge from secondary education with more than just qualifications – they will be prepared for continuing education, life, work and citizenship.

Our experience is that the Bacculaureate approach has significant benefits for students, tutors and teachers. It provides a rationale for the whole curriculum being offered and motivates students and teachers to take all elements seriously. Too often, students and their teachers give scant attention to guidance, enrichment and tutorial activities which are not immediately relevant to their main studies. By accrediting and tracking all the elements of a study programme and showing how each element builds into a whole qualification, the attitude of students is often transformed.

We can see that the proposed National Bacculaureate has many of the features and elements of the SFBacc and we would be very willing to share our experience of the benefits and issues of the Bacculaureate approach. A couple of our colleges have developed sophisticated tracking systems which underpin the whole scheme and they would argue that effective tracking is critical to any successful implementation of the Bacculaureate.

We can see significant merit in a twin-track National Bacculaureate encompassing a technical and general pathway. We agree it is also important to set the standard for the National Bacculaureate at level 3 irrespective of the pathway followed. However if the scheme is to be of value to the whole cohort it must have intermediate levels which are achievable and act as stepping stones to higher levels. We can see no reason why it should not be possible to 'pick & mix' core qualifications at different levels and across academic and vocational boundaries. Many Sixth Form College students success combine A levels with BTECs and GCSEs.

C. Careers advice & LEPs

Sixth Form Colleges would support the principle that good quality IAG is an essential part of any worthwhile study programme. Colleges that do this well have built up considerable expertise within their own workforce and are not always convinced that external careers advisors understand both the complexities of the UCAS application system and the labour market opportunities for aspiring graduates and level 3 leavers. Ideally advice should be independent but it is more important that it is well informed and understands the minds and aspirations of young people faced with what are often life-changing decisions.

We think the LEPs as careers brokers and IAG advisors could have similar limitations. The danger here is that local enterprises, not surprisingly, see the world through their own local lens and limit their views to what is needed for the local economy. Sixth Form Colleges and most schools are very different to General FE Colleges – they play to a much bigger stage (usually progression to higher education rather than employment) and need to advise their students accordingly. There is certainly a place for a more active engagement between local businesses and secondary education but it should not be the tail that wags the dog.

This also applies to work experience and general engagement with employers and the world of work. While it is valuable and, in some cases essential, that students have work experience placements, it can be counter-productive if the placement has little relevance to the aspiration of the student. Placing students appropriately is a skilled and time-consuming task and there are resource implications here. There is a case for a national work placement agency which, operating like UCAS perhaps, matches available places with student applicants. However, for the reasons cited above, there is more merit in equipping Colleges with the resource to appoint and train a co-ordinator for this task.

We acknowledge that the comments above could not generally apply to schools and the report recognises the severe limitations of relying on schools as sources of independent careers and IAG advice. However a solution for schools would not necessarily be right for Colleges where the scale and opportunities are different. We would go further and suggest that Colleges, rather than the LEPs, have both the capacity and expertise to be themselves the best source of careers IAG for the whole local secondary provision and any new requirement to co-operate would be an excellent platform to facilitate this.

D. Summary response to the 15 Skills Taskforce recommendations

1. We strongly support this and have experience which we are happy to share.
2. We strongly support the notion of four learning domains but have significant concerns over how they might be funded. The current funding regime would preclude everything but the core learning and a minimal personal skills programme.
3. We have some reservations over a mandatory requirement for all to follow a full Baccalaureate programme but agree it should be the norm.
4. We strongly support the principle that the Baccalaureate should be a level 3 award and not an accountability measure
5. We agree that there will need to be a level 2 intermediate level and recommend that a pick & mix approach which combines academic and vocational and is multi-level would aid flexibility and progression.
6. There is already an accountability measure planned around destinations at KS4 and KS5 and this may be sufficient to drive behaviour in the way intended by this recommendation. We are, therefore, not sure that adding a funding incentive is necessary.
7. For the reasons stated above we are not convinced that LEPs can broker IAG in the way envisaged and suggest using Colleges themselves as a resource for all in providing careers and guidance expertise.
8. We support the intention to encourage Colleges and schools to collaborate but are not convinced that a mandatory responsibility is the way forward. The best incentive to collaborate is to recognise that it is in everyone's best interest to work together. The best Colleges and schools already recognise that.
9. We agree that English and Mathematics should continue beyond GCSE but, as explained in para 1 above, there are major practical and resource issues which would have to be addressed.
10. We think it is generally best to integrate additional applied Mathematics into existing core programmes but this does and should not preclude 'real-world' contextual learning.

11. We agree that personal skills development programmes should be an entitlement. There are resource implications of any entitlement programme and these must be addressed for these programmes to have value and substance.
12. We agree workplace learning is important but has to be relevant and useful as discussed in para 3 above.
13. We agree that a moratorium on change to accountability measures for five years would provide stability and allow schools and colleges to focus on pedagogy rather than assessment.
14. We agree that high achievers need specialist post-16 provision and that funding should be made available for this. However we do not think this should be at the expense of other learners. In broad terms a funding model should be developed which allows all students, irrespective of ability, to follow a programme that enable them to make good progress and to achieve their potential.
15. We agree that changes to the machinery of Government does not necessarily bring the benefits intended and therefore agree that a cabinet post combining skills and qualifications could bring coherence to policy and decision making in this vital area.

Annex 1: Members of the SFCA Curriculum and Quality Committee

Representative	Sixth Form College	Role
Yolanda Botham	Lowestoft Sixth Form College	Principal
Peter Roberts	Oldham Sixth Form College	Vice Principal
Ian Hooper	Woodhouse College	Vice Principal
Peter Cooper	Hereford Sixth Form College	Deputy Principal
Martin Ward	Shrewsbury SFC	Principal
Sue Wallis	Franklin College	Deputy Principal
Gail Yeadon	The Blackpool Sixth Form College	Deputy Principal
Jeff Chadd	Barrow-in-Furness SFC	Deputy Principal
Andy Boden	Sir John Deane's SFC	Deputy Principal
David Adelman	Godalming Sixth Form College	Principal
Nick Allen	Peter Symonds College	Quality Manager
Madeline Woolfenden	Saint Brendan's Sixth Form College	Vice Principal
Matt Atkinson	Richard Taunton's College	Deputy Principal

Supported by the following members of the SFCA team:

David Igoe	Chief Executive
James Kewin	Deputy Chief Executive
Deepa Jethwa	Policy Officer