

Developing a national baccalaureate system in England: A policy learning approach

**A discussion paper for the
National Baccalaureate Trust Convention
25 June 2015**

**Professors Ann Hodgson and Ken Spours
UCL Institute of Education**

Abstract

This paper, written for the first convention of the National Baccalaureate Trust, suggests that there is an emerging baccalaureate era in England, but that its future shape remains uncertain because of a lack of settled will about the purposes and functions of upper secondary education and a ‘knowledge gap’ in previous 14-19 reforms and baccalaureate ideas. The paper aims to address this knowledge gap by applying three dimensions of policy learning – international understanding; historical understanding/the exercise of policy memory and whole-system understanding. Through a policy learning approach we hope to create shared knowledge and the identification possible curriculum tools to support the building of a national baccalaureate framework that can command widespread support in the English context.

An emerging baccalaureate era in England?

Baccalaureate-type qualifications are a feature of many European countries’ upper secondary education (USE) systems. However, this does not include England due to its long-standing tradition of using choice-based, single subject qualifications between the ages of 14-19. Support for a baccalaureate approach to 14-19 education and training, however, can now be found across the political spectrum in England, although there is as yet no agreement about function or form. The introduction by the previous Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition Government of the ‘English Baccalaureate’ and ‘Technical Baccalaureate’ performance measures; the call for a National Baccalaureate by the Labour Party’s Independent Skills Taskforce (2014), reinforced by Shadow education Secretary, Tristram Hunt’s announcement (The Guardian, 2015), and the launch of a National Baccalaureate Trust by education and wider stakeholders are just the latest in a long line of baccalaureate-type proposals from think tanks, civil society bodies and political parties in opposition that stretch back over more than half a century. What is new is that they are being put forward both by those in power, as well as by those in opposition.

This apparent convergence is being fuelled by both international and national factors. Global pressures, particularly in the form of international benchmarks, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and changes in the national and international economy have resulted in demands for improved attainment of 21st Century Competences, including mathematics, languages and societal skills (Ananiadou and Claro, 2009; Halasz and Michel, 2011). Nationally, the previous Labour Government instigated the Raising of the Participation Age to 18 by 2015 (which the current government have continued), suggesting the existence of universal USE in England in which the award of a baccalaureate-type qualification at 18/19 could provide an appropriate recognition of a broad set of achievements during this phase (Hodgson and Spours, 2012).

At the same time, however, English USE (the 14-19 phase) is internationally distinctive and increasingly disadvantaged. Its academic track (GCSEs and A Level subjects) remains elective, leading to narrow study programmes post-16. Its vocational track (e.g. BTEC and CGLI awards) is also narrow, lacking significant elements of general education. This traditional focus on choice-based subject specialisation and a sharply differentiated academic and vocational curriculum is also reinforced by relatively low hours of tuition compared internationally (SFCA, 2015).

The widespread interest in baccalaureate ideas for the 14-19 curriculum can thus be seen as a response to both global trends and English weaknesses. In the light of these factors the educational case for a baccalaureate approach at the end of USE is becoming stronger. On account of their grouped nature, baccalaureates are able to represent a holistic curriculum embodying clearly identifiable values and purposes, something that the elective single-subject A Level curriculum cannot. Due to their high volumes of study, baccalaureates also encourage greater breadth and demand. Moreover, programmes are able to promote different types and combinations of learning and opportunities for new and creative aspects, particularly if general and vocational study has been deliberately designed into a single, unified framework. As such, these frameworks are better able to prepare young people for further study and adult and working life than narrower general or vocational courses.

However, baccalaureates have their challenges. They can be difficult to achieve, particularly if they contain prescribed subjects with higher volumes of study and they are also potentially expensive because of the required hours of tuition. There are also wider system and political challenges. Given the dominant English tradition of post-16 specialisation and a highly charged political climate surrounding education, there is currently no settled will about the purpose, design and accreditation of the USE curriculum in England. In post-16 education there remain sharp differences of political and educational opinion about the balance of internal and external assessment and the nature of the qualifications structure, for example, whether A Levels should be linear or modular. This stands in contrast to the other countries of the UK where the devolved administrations have managed to create, to varying degrees, a consensual path of development around *Curriculum for Excellence* (Scotland)¹, *The Welsh Baccalaureate* (Wales)² and *The 14-19 Entitlement Framework* (Northern Ireland)³.

There may be some agreement, however, around the idea of 16-19 study programmes; maths and English up to age 19, the potential role of a research project in advanced level study and the need for an element of work experience and the acquisition of wider skills. Pre-16, there are different opinions about the role of the EBacc, but less so around the potential of the Progress 8 performance measure at Key Stage 4. While not wishing to paint over inevitable political disagreements, it could be argued that there is the possibility of a greater consensus around those aspects of the curriculum that could help usher in a baccalaureate era in England.

Confusions around what we mean by the term ‘baccalaureate’

Unsurprisingly, given this history and the fact that baccalaureates have played a relatively minor role within the English 14-19 system, together with the fragmented way that they have been developed and discussed over the past two decades, there is currently little agreement as to what we mean by the term. Viewed

¹ See <http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/learningandteaching/thecurriculum/>

² See <http://www.welshbaccalaureate.org.uk/Welsh-Baccalaureate-Home-Page>

³ See <http://www.deni.gov.uk/entitlement-framework.htm>

internationally, 'bacca-laureate' commonly refers to a broad grouped qualification awarded at the end of secondary education (Thompson *et al.*, 2003). Policy-makers and wider stakeholders in England, on the other hand, have used the term 'bacca-laureate' in varied ways to describe the idea of a curriculum framework, a performance measure and a holistic qualification. Furthermore, the term bacca-laureate has been used to describe a track-based qualification that represents either academic/general or vocational/technical attainment and a unified award that represents both academic and vocational outcomes. It may have been useful thus far for policy-makers and practitioners to use the term in this loose way. However, if we are indeed entering a bacca-laureate era in England, it is now important to take a more analytical approach in order to understand the similarities and differences in purpose and design of different bacca-laureate-related proposals in order to generate a wider understanding and a greater level of agreement.

A policy learning approach

The advent of a 'bacca-laureate era' has exposed a gap in our collective understanding – the knowledge of how England has reached this point, how lessons might be learnt from the past, from international experience and what possible options there are for the future. Our contention is that the recent history of bacca-laureate developments and designs has not been adequately documented and analysed. As we will see, there have been periods in the past, notably in the early and mid-1990s and then again in the early 2000s, where ideas about the reform of 14-19 curriculum and qualifications were hotly debated and analytical tools were subsequently developed to support future designs. However, recent years have seen very little reflection of this type, despite the proliferation of bacca-laureate proposals by awarding bodies and professional groupings.

Arguably both policy-makers and practitioners alike appear to suffer from what Higham and Yoemans (2007) refer to the absence of 'policy memory'. Policy-makers from successive governments have chosen policies on political and ideological grounds rather than as a result of a deep understanding of past reforms and the

significance of this history for managing change. They have also tended to be highly selective in their appreciation of international experience, recognizing developments elsewhere that broadly support policy preferences. At the same time, practitioners and wider stakeholders, including awarding bodies, have reacted to particular government policies by developing new awards on national, local or on a sector basis. In virtually all cases, the focus has been on action rather than reflection and the exercise of what has been termed 'policy learning' (Raffe and Spours, 2007; Raffe, 2011; Alexiadou and Lange, 2014). The result has been the growth of a crowded and confusing policy and initiative landscape currently incapable of generating agreement.

If a bacculaureate era is dawning in England, albeit in a fragmented way, we need a reflective approach that offers an alternative to politically inspired amnesia, policy selection and policy borrowing and, in doing so, that can create the basis for a sustainable consensus based on shared knowledge. Here we will argue for a policy learning approach based on three inter-related levels of understanding:

1. *International understanding* in relation to global trends and responses in USE.
2. *National historical understanding and exercising policy memory* in relation to English curriculum reform and previous bacculaureate-type approaches.
3. *Whole system understanding* – appreciating the relationship between curriculum and qualifications reform, wider governance arrangements (institutional delivery, funding and inspection), the youth labour market and policy-making processes.

In addition, we recognize the importance of learning from a fourth dimension - professional practice - and this will be reflected in future publications.

International understanding: global development in USE

The internal and external logics of universal USE

There is an increasing global policy focus on USE. This is due to the achievement of universal primary education that leads to a demand for an expanded secondary phase; a need to ensure that young people become active and productive citizens; and the new knowledge and skills demands of a globalised labour market (World Bank, 2005; UNESCO, 2005; Sahlberg, 2007). The development of a USE phase exerts contradictory pressures through what might be termed 'internal and external logics'. The internal logic refers to the increased diversity of the student population of USE, some of whom will treat this phase as an end-point prior to entry to the labour market, while others will see it as a preparatory stage for accessing higher education. The external logic, on the other hand, refers to the perceived demands of globalization in relation to the economy and society, notably the need to attain 21st Century Competences (Gordon *et al.*, 2009; Halasz and Michel, 2011), to balance a common curriculum with greater specialization and to ensure some uniformity of experience to support social cohesion. Viewed overall, the internal logic suggests differentiation of the curriculum and learning while the external logic points to greater commonality.

Different USE strategies – unified or divided systems?

The balance and inter-relationship of these developments and tensions within USE have been understood and addressed in different ways in various national systems. Strategies employed in relation to USE can be conceptualized on a divided/integrated continuum along three dimensions – curriculum and qualifications; institutional organization; and early/deferred specialization.

Hodgson and Spours (2014a), building on earlier concepts developed by Raffe *et al.*, (1998), suggest that general and vocational learning across the four countries of the UK for example, could be categorized according to whether they are *tracked* (involving separate curriculum, qualifications and assessment systems for general

and vocational learning); *linked* (in which tracks are retained, but with limited common curricular or qualification elements, such as key skills); or *unified* (in which pathways or combinations of study are contained with a single certification and assessment framework).

The second dimension concerns the institutional arrangements for the provision of general and vocational education. Here a distinction can be made between segregated/divided and integrated/unified. In 'segregated/divided' systems general and vocational education are delivered in different types of schools or in different modes of learning (education-based or work-based), whereas in 'integrated/unified' systems schools offer both general and vocational programmes (Le Metais, 2002; Sahlberg, 2007).

A third dimension involves the distinction between 'early/late specialization'. The World Bank (2005) has suggested three 'scenarios' constructed around the type of curriculum strategy and the timing and extent of selection and specialization. Scenario 1 involves early tracking, early specialization, selection and streaming. Scenario 2 is based around deferred specialization until the end of lower secondary education. Scenario 3 is an extension of Scenario 2 in which specialization and selection is deferred until the end of USE.

While political interpretations of the balance of these trends will differ, overall the international literatures suggest that there has been a gradual coming together of academic and vocational learning, e.g. UNESCO (2005), Sahlberg (2007), El-Kogali (2012) and Wheelahan (2013), to meet the increased demand for more highly skilled labour; to create opportunities for flexibility within more integrated systems (Dufaux, 2012) and as a result of the evolving relationship between vocational and general education and changes in the global economy (Lasonen and Young, 1998; Burdett, 2012). These developments would thus tend to support the further exploration of a more unified, integrated and late specialization model of USE in the English context.

Historical understanding: curriculum and bacculaureate frameworks in the English context

Three approaches to reform

Here we employ the tracked/linked/unified distinction offered by Raffe and colleagues to historically analyse curriculum and qualifications development for 16-19 (and later for 14-19) education and training in England from the 1960s in order to understand how these relate to current bacculaureate developments and debates. As we shall see below, there have been differences in the extent of activity in relation to these three reform approaches. There has been a great deal more national development and experimentation in tracked approaches because these reflect the dominant national tradition. Linkages strategies were a particular feature of the Labour Government policy between 1997-2010. On the other hand, unified approaches have generated a great many proposals and reports, attracted much interest from education professionals and inspired many bottom-up initiatives over the past two decades. They have also underpinned a national system in Scotland and Wales, albeit in differing ways. However, they have yet to make a serious impact in England. For analytical purposes, it is also worth noting that these 'types' of reform approaches are not discrete. In reality they overlap and can be seen in hybridized forms in each national system.

Type 1. Track-based qualifications reforms

Track-based reforms have taken two forms – a) broadening general/academic education and – b) diversifying vocational education through the introduction of pre-vocational and broad vocational awards.

a) Broadening general/academic education - within a matter of years after the introduction of single-subject A Levels to replace the broader Higher School Certificate in England and Wales (which might have been considered as a form of baccalaureate), concerns were raised about what appeared to be an excessively specialised and academic curriculum that was not relevant to the country's future economic and social needs (Pound, 2003). Largely as a result of these criticisms, over the next 20 years there were a number of government and non-government proposals for broadening advanced level general education. These included:

- the International Baccalaureate (IB), introduced in the late 1960s;
- the Major and Minor framework proposals, published by the Schools Council in 1966;
- the Qualifying (Q) and Further (F) proposals, published by the Schools Council in 1969;
- proposals for Normals (N) and Furthers (F), published by the Schools Council in 1973, (see Mathieson, 1992).

While the IB actually saw the light of day as an alternative to A Levels and is still used in a number of schools and colleges in England and worldwide, the other three proposals, aimed at either supplementing or replacing A Levels with a broader set of subjects, faced opposition from higher education and the teacher unions, as well as from Secretaries of State for Education and were never implemented (Mathieson, 1992).

The issue of broadening general education, however, did not go away. In 1983 the School Examination and Assessment Council (SEAC) proposed the introduction of the Advanced Supplementary (AS) qualification in a range of subjects and to be taken alongside A Levels. Uptake, however, was poor and the Supplementary AS was primarily used by students for further specialisation, rather than as a way of broadening their A Level programmes. This reform was swiftly followed by proposals by the Higginson Committee that recommended the reshaping of A Levels so that learners could take five subjects rather than three, with less focus on content and more on conceptual understanding. Within hours of Professor Higginson

reporting, however, the proposals were rejected by the then Secretary of State for Education, Kenneth Baker, and by the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher (Young and Leney, 1997).

The debate about broadening was taken up once again in the mid-1990s with the Dearing Review of 16-19 Qualifications. Lord Dearing recommended keeping the three qualifications tracks – general, broad vocational and occupational – separate and distinctive. For the general track he proposed a new Advanced Subsidiary (AS) qualification to be taken at the end of one year of study and worth 40 per cent of a full A Level. Its purpose was not only to facilitate broadening of study, but also to provide a stepping-stone to a full A Level and a stepping off point for learners who might not be able to achieve the full award (Dearing, 1996). His proposals were taken forward by the new Labour Government in its document, *Qualifying for Success*, and developed into the Subsidiary AS, which formed the first part of a new two-stage A Level (AS/A2).

Ministers hoped that learners would take up to five AS subjects in the first year of study which, alongside Key Skills, would provide a broader advanced level programme. The *Curriculum 2000* reforms, as they became known, led to most learners taking four subjects in the first year not five and, possibly more importantly, made the A Level standard more accessible through modular assessment (Hodgson and Spours, 2003a).

From 2002 with the publication of the Green Paper, *14-19 Education: Extending Opportunities, Raising Standards*, the reform focus turned from 16-19 to 14-19, with proposals for broadening Key Stage 4 through the reduction of subject prescription and the introduction of Applied GCSEs and other vocational awards, such as the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) qualifications. In the context of this article, we see these as attempts to broaden general education even though the mechanisms were vocational. Most schools used these qualifications less as vehicles for broadening and more as components of an 'alternative curriculum' or 'pathway' for those deemed unable to follow a full GCSE programme (Higham and Yeomans, 2007).

New Labour's two major curriculum and qualifications reform programmes, *Curriculum 2000* for 16-19 year olds and the Key Stage 4 Increased Flexibility agenda for 14-16 year olds, were both partial and voluntarist. They were aimed at particular groups of students rather than all 14-19 year olds and they were not part of a prescribed or statutory framework so were subject to the curricular arrangements in each individual school or college.

Since the mid-2000s and the publication of the White Paper *14-19 Education and Skills* in 2005, which reaffirmed the position of GCSEs and A Levels, attempts to broaden general education have been taken over by private awarding bodies. Currently three awards dominate this area – the IB, the Cambridge International Examinations (CIE) Pre-U Diploma and the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance's (AQA) Baccalaureate (AQA Bacc). However, these awards are taken by a small proportion of the post-16 cohort.

So what does history tell us about broadening approaches to academic/general education? First, the specialist A Level has proven remarkably resilient because of its close alignment with single subject honours degrees and the fact that any subject broadening would involve a dilution of specialist subject content, a threat that is always hotly debated politically. Second, and following this, all broadening strategies that have proposed a wider range of subjects have either been rejected by government, or higher education or seriously diluted. The only subject broadening strategy to become government policy, *Curriculum 2000*, was very limited in terms of increasing subject breadth. Third, the broadening strategies that have emerged have tended to focus on developing research skills (e.g. the Extended Project Qualification or Critical Thinking) or engaging with wider experiences such as volunteering; entrepreneurship and the work-related curriculum. These appear to imitate the core of the IB that contains an extended essay, theory of knowledge and creativity, action and service, and now play an important role in various baccalaureate proposals because they can be seen to easily accompany the English tradition of subject specialization.

b) Diversifying vocational education - A Basis for Choice, published by the Further Education Unit in 1979, could be seen to mark the beginning of curriculum

frameworks in the area of pre-vocational and vocational qualifications. The diversification of vocational education in response to growing post-16 full-time participation was marked by a proliferation of new awards in the early-mid 1980s. These included the Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education (CPVE) that provided 'vocational taster courses', the City and Guilds Diploma of Vocational Education (DVE) and in colleges, BTEC First Diploma. While differing somewhat in design and function, these awards could be seen to represent a 'prevocational curriculum' (Pring, 1986) that promoted a new range of basic skills, experiential learning approaches, wider process skills, such as problem-solving and new approaches to assessment, notably recording of achievement. In retrospect, they can be seen as having succeeded in introducing new methods of teaching, learning and assessment, but to have been less successful in promoting learner progression.

General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs), launched in the early 1990s, were intended to be the national successor to these private awarding body qualifications. They were a response to the failure of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) to take root in full-time education and resolve the progression question that remained an issue for the 1980s initiatives. In the event, it was the BTEC awards that endured because they were liked by FE colleges, were broadly accepted by employers, had a progression ladder of awards and were not directly under government control. GNVQs were eventually phased out in 2007. The most recent manifestations of this type of broad vocational qualification were the Advanced Certificates of Vocational Education that formed part of *Curriculum 2000* and the 14-19 Diplomas, which were introduced in 2008 and shortly thereafter discontinued (see Hodgson and Spours, 2007 and 2008 for more detail). These too fell foul of government policy decision-making.

Government sponsored awards failed to endure as qualifications due primarily to their low status and take-up. On the other hand, they had more success as a 'broadening curriculum' that functioned as an alternative to subject-based breadth by offering a wide range of skills and new approaches to teaching, learning and assessment. These curriculum features have gradually seeped into the English USE

landscape over the past 30 years, starting with the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI), the pre-vocational frameworks and then followed by new broad vocational awards. Interestingly, these curriculum ideas and practices have also become part of a broader curriculum approach in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland and, as we will see, have featured in many of the unified baccalaureate initiatives and proposals of the past 25 years in England.

Type 2. Linkages strategies

Linkages strategies are a particular response to the English tracked qualifications system with their intention to preserve the tracks while providing a bridge between them (Raffe *et al.*, 1998). Linkages strategies have emerged in two major forms at the national level over the past two decades:

- a. *A qualification or a component of a qualification*, which can be taken as part of either a general or vocational programme. These are intended to increase breadth and also to address the academic/vocational divide in a limited way by providing a common experience for learners on both general and vocational programmes. The most notable examples are the variants of Core Skills/Key Skills/Functional Skills in English/Communications, Mathematics/Numeracy and ICT that since the early 1990s have been developed as stand-alone qualifications, but have also been required as part of grouped awards, such as BTECs and GNVQs, or been recommended as important elements of advanced level programmes.
- b. *A framework that aligns general and vocational qualifications* – the two examples in the English system are the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) introduced in 1992 and its successor, the Qualifications and Curriculum Framework (QCF) with its unitized system. Both were intended to provide parity of esteem between track-based academic and vocational qualifications.

In the English qualifications context, linkages strategies have proved to be a weak reform approach in that in practice they have been largely confined to vocational education and its broad-based awards. Key skills struggled to become part of A Level programmes and the QCF failed to embrace academic qualifications. However, they could be seen as suggestive of something bigger - the idea of common curriculum

components and an overall framework that aligns different elements of qualifications – that has become associated with Type 3 approaches. In practice, however, the actual linkages reforms themselves always fell short of this because of their intention to bridge the qualifications tracks rather than to replace them.

Type 3. Unified approaches

In England, unified approaches to curriculum and qualifications reforms constitute a rich but subordinate strand of 14-19 reform. There have been many proposals and initiatives over the years and they keep on coming, with the National Baccalaureate proposals in 2015 as the latest example. However, as we will see, they have never been fully acted upon by Westminster Governments and the only current national system is the Welsh Baccalaureate developed by the Welsh Assembly Government. Since the early 1990s unified approaches have taken three forms –

a) Overarching frameworks b) Open modular systems and c) Grouped baccalaureate awards.

a) Overarching frameworks (1990s – 2003) - during the period 1991 to 2003 there were a number of ‘official’ proposals for overarching qualifications frameworks, which were conceived as a mechanism for encompassing and accrediting existing qualifications together with new experiences or skills. Overarching advanced and general diplomas were briefly mentioned in the 1991 White Paper, Education and Training for the 21st Century, though never developed. This particular policy document will be remembered more for the creation of a national triple-track system than for curriculum frameworks (Hodgson and Spours, 1997). Ideas about overarching qualifications frameworks resurfaced in the Dearing Report (Dearing, 1996) with proposals for National Certificates at Intermediate and Advanced Levels and an Advanced Diploma. All required attainment in a certain number of GCSE or A Level qualifications (or their vocational equivalents) together with the three Key Skills of Communication, Application of Number and IT. In 1998, QCA and its equivalents in Wales and Northern Ireland commissioned research on an Overarching Certificate at Advanced Level and a research team from the Institute of

Education, University of London and the Further Education Development Agency proposed a rather thin and undemanding 'Core and Specialisation' model that was recognized through a transcript and underpinned by Management of Learning.

The end of the 1990s also saw interest in the idea of a Graduation Certificate (Lucas, 2003). Originating in a report published by the Social Exclusion Unit, QCA was commissioned by national government to produce a certificate, which would be obtainable by the age of 19 on 'graduation' from education and training. Unlike the Dearing proposals for Certificates and Diplomas at Advanced Level, the Graduation Certificate was focused on achievement at Intermediate Level, which was seen as the benchmark for employability, and on other forms of experience outside the school/college curriculum that would prepare young people for citizenship. This was followed by the proposal for a Matriculation Diploma, which was laid out in the 2002 Green Paper, *14-19: Extending Opportunities, Raising Standards*. It would be based on three levels of award – Intermediate, Advanced and Higher Diplomas - all of which required a minimum of Level 2 Key Skills in Literacy, Numeracy and ICT and evidence of achievement in wider activities (e.g. active citizenship and work-related learning) as well as certain grades in GCSEs and A Levels or their vocational equivalents.

New Labour, and even the Conservative Government that preceded it, realized that something additional was needed to overarch the qualifications tracks but failed to the summon political will to get beyond the inquiry stage. However, what was taking place was a gradual accumulation of ideas and design features from these 'official' publications that were eventually to find their way into the Tomlinson proposal (Working Group on 14-19 Reform, 2004). These included awards at different levels, the requirement of a certain volume and level of study, the importance of key skills, the recognition of wider activities and the role of a research/extended project.

b) Open modular/unitised systems – those who argued for open modular and unitized systems were in favour of a flexible curriculum and qualifications approach that recognized all types of learning and for all ages (Stanton, 1997). An important element of these ideas was the gradual accumulation of achievement that blended

with the elective, open and choice-based features of the English qualifications system. Support for this approach also flowed from competence-based vocational education and training and the most developed proposals in England included the Further Education Unit's unitized credit system in 1993, which heavily influenced the national development of a QCF. The QCF was used extensively for adult and vocational learning, but not in academically dominated English 14-19 education. Scotland's USE system, however, is based on this open modular approach (Raffe, 1997).

Experimentation with modularization/unitization of qualifications has come and gone in England and proposals for an open modular system have been strongly resisted in academic qualifications due to concerns about students taking a 'pick and mix' approach to the curriculum, anxieties about over assessment and bureaucracy and notions of 'dumbing down' through breaking learning down into 'bite-sized chunks'. Nevertheless, we will see that these ideas have continued to inform vocational education and, ironically given the anxieties in relation to A Level learning, are used extensively in higher education. Of immediate relevance to this paper is a recognition that a system based on units and modules of learning and accumulation of credits has been an important element of most proposals for unified baccalaureate systems.

c) Grouped baccalaureate awards - the publication of *A British Baccalaureate* (Finegold *et al.*, 1990) marked the beginning of a wave of proposals for a unified grouped baccalaureate system (e.g. Royal Society 1991, NCE 1995). Those arguing for this type of reform sought to bring academic and vocational learning into a single framework and to encourage learners to take a combination of subjects in the 14-19 phase to ensure breadth of study and to address the culture of dropping 'difficult' subjects, such as mathematics, sciences and modern foreign languages. The 'core/specialization model' outlined in an article by Young and Spours (1996), that marked a move away from the 'domain' based British Baccalaureate proposals, influenced future designs, including those coming from the Tomlinson Working Group on 14-19 Reform in 2004.

During the 1990s there were, however, limits to both the scope and depth of the professional consensus around these ideas. Most of the unified reform proposals from 14+ were 'blueprints' and did not go into a great deal of design or operational detail. Amidst a consensus on basic principles, little attention was devoted to the foundation and intermediate levels of learning or to the curriculum for 14-16 year olds. Moreover, discussions about an approach to certificating apprenticeship remained relatively neglected. This lack of detail and scope meant that there was also relatively little consideration of the reform process itself, the architecture of the system or implementation issues. Nevertheless, the proposals in the 1990s had a strong influence on a set of ideas which were developed by teacher professional associations and academics and which became known as *The English Baccalaureate System from 14+* (Hodgson and Spours 2003b).

These fed into the Tomlinson Working Group on 14-19 Reform (2003-4), which was tasked by the then Secretary of State, Charles Clarke, to consider the longer-term future of 14-19 education and training. During its deliberations over a period of some 18 months, the Tomlinson Committee proposed a 'Unified Framework for 14-19 Learning' that would subsume existing qualifications (GCSEs, GNVQs, A Levels and NVQs' from Entry to Advanced Level), and with less external assessment (Working Group on 14-19 Reform, 2004).

However, the 14-19 Working Group's proposal for a unified diploma system was not accepted by the Labour Government due to the politics of an approaching general election (Hodgson and Spours, 2008), although this was not the only factor in its failure to become policy. The Tomlinson Final Report had weaknesses as well as considerable strengths. A convincing narrative about the needs of 14-19 year olds and strong arguments for reform, supported by a realistic concept of a unified curriculum and qualifications framework, eventually produced a highly complex set of designs that would have been difficult to implement. Following Tony Blair's rejection of the Tomlinson proposals, the idea of a baccalaureate for the English context did not die. Instead it fragmented into several different forms as it was championed by local areas (e.g. Surrey Graduation Certificate), groups of schools (e.g. Mod Bac); by teacher unions and professional associations (e.g. the SFBac, The

Headteachers' Roundtable Baccalaureate), and by political parties in Opposition to the Government, such as the Liberal Democrats (2009) and most recently the Labour Party's Independent Skills Taskforce's (2014) proposal for a National Baccalaureate.

Meanwhile, the term 'Baccalaureate' has been adopted by the previous Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition Government as the nomenclature for two types of performance measures that are used for holding schools and colleges to account – the English Baccalaureate (the achievement of A*-C grades in GCSEs in certain academic subjects at 16) and the Technical Baccalaureate (the achievement of a specified range of technical qualifications at advanced level). Focused on increasing the uptake of 'facilitating subjects' for access Russell Group universities, together with yet another attempt to raise the status of vocational education, these could be seen as variants of Type 1 track-based reforms that could eventually result in a twin-track baccalaureate system in England.

Historical reflections on curriculum and qualifications reform

Track-based proposals to broaden academic/general education post-16 over the past 60 years have been either rejected or, more recently, implemented in a limited way. The reality in 2015 is that those students engaging with A Levels usually end up focusing on three subjects, much as they did in the 1950s. Current government reforms to revert to linear A Levels will consolidate this historical feature. The reform of vocational education, on the other hand, has seen the introduction of 'broad skills' (but not broader elements of general education) and also, in some cases, the decline of practical vocational learning. Vocational qualifications thus remain narrow, albeit in different ways to those in the academic/general track. Linkages strategies, while arguably well intentioned, have failed significantly to improve the experience of academic/general learning. What we should recognize from this history is that reforms that retain the academic/vocational divide do not work. Wider economic and societal developments demand we close this gap, not widen it. Herein lies one of the main cases for a more unified system.

However, tracked and linkages reforms, coming from the broad vocational side in particular, have introduced several curriculum tools that could be featured more overtly within a unified framework. These include the limited use of modularity; a key research component; broad skills including mathematics, languages and digital technologies; access to vocational and wider experiences and careers education, information, advice and guidance.

Unified approaches are historically associated with left politics, in that most have originated from progressive think tanks and civil society organisations; teacher unions and professional associations; opposition political parties and are currently being enacted in countries of the UK that could be broadly described as social democratic. This has been both a strength and a weakness. On the one hand, unified approaches are highly attuned to the need for inclusion in a rapidly expanding USE system and for a dynamic relationship between general and vocational education that could support economic and societal innovation. On the other hand, they have been presented as a critique of subject specialization rather than as a means of improving the quality of academic and vocational learning. Furthermore, unified approaches have since 2005 fragmented into several different competing proposals and initiatives, adding to a cluttered and competitive landscape and thus leaving them playing a marginal role in USE rather than becoming a coherent organizing framework. They have also added to a cluttered and competitive landscape rather than providing a means of simplifying it. As such unified approaches could be characterised as oppositional and additional. These are just some of the challenges to be overcome if the unified approach to baccalaureate reform is to make headway in the English context, particularly in the current political climate.

Whole system understanding - the inter-dependence of qualifications, organizational reform and the policy process

Reforming 14-19 qualifications has been a favourite strategy of successive governments because of the central position of qualifications in relation to learning, selection and progression. Qualifications outcomes are also a very public expression of national standards and there has been an almost religious belief that reforming them is something that ministers and governments do to show that they are getting on with the job.

The third dimension of policy learning – whole system understanding – suggests a very different approach is needed in relation to the making and an enactment of policy. One of the many problems of rapid ‘qualifications-led reform’ is the instability and confusion it produces for students, parents, employers and for higher education. The scale of change required in a baccalaureate system suggests that the reform process has to be much slower; more joined up; more consensual and longer-term; and something that would need to span more than one five-year parliament.

Curriculum and qualifications reform also has an inter-dependent relationship with education institutions and funding. A more expansive curriculum offer requires collaboration beyond the boundaries of individual schools, colleges and workplaces. While schools and colleges may be capable of providing particular types of baccalaureate, local collaboration can increase the range of ‘lines’ or subjects available. Moreover, collaboration between education professionals and other social partners at the local level, such as employers and voluntary and community organisations, can enrich study by offering more diverse settings for learning. In addition, partnership provides opportunities to collaborate around assessment and quality assurance, for example, in relation to demanding research projects that would sit at the centre of a baccalaureate. Funding is a critical factor.

Baccalaureates will not come cheap on account of the breadth and depth of study required and for many students this might also mean a third year post-16. At a time of constrained resources, it will be important to understand how the funding

available can best be used to enhance the student experience and to try to achieve economies of scale for greater efficiency.

Finally, history strongly suggests that a successful and sustainable baccalaureate era will not come solely top-down from government. It will require a balance of bottom-up innovation in conjunction with facilitating government frameworks. Here, therefore, lies the crucial role for local innovation and curriculum experimentation that is driven by highly innovative and education professionals working with a range of equally talented and dedicated stakeholders. A holistic and creative curriculum that involves engagement with economic life and civil society has to be strongly rooted in localities, but located within a clear supportive national framework.

Whole system understanding thus points to a slower and more deliberative policy process; the gradual reform of several different system dimensions that work in a synergistic way and the creation of spaces so that professionals and their wider social partners have the time and support to innovate on the ground.

Conclusion – policy learning for USE in the English context

An English translation of global trends in USE

Policy borrowing is usually premised on the virtues of transferring ‘excellent practice’ from one national setting to another (Raffe, 2011). Policy learning, on the other hand, involves a more dynamic and reflexive process of creatively interpreting global trends through national and sub-national contexts. Policy learning can also be internationally collaborative involving the identification of common challenges that face all national education systems and what can be learned and done together (Hodgson and Spours 2014b).

We will suggest that a policy learning approach from an international perspective will require an ‘English translation’. This arguably involves going with the grain of our national system and its specialization simultaneously to modernize and enrich both the academic and vocational traditions. History suggests that this strategy,

rather than the mechanical imposition of subject breadth, may enjoy more success in improving the USE curriculum.

Such a pragmatic English translation in the area of baccalaureates suggests that a 'core/specialisation' model of a 'National Baccalaureate' may be the optimum way forward. Interestingly, several existing models (e.g. AQA Bac, SFBac, Mod Bac and emergent designs from the National Baccalaureate Trust) broadly adopt this logic by providing a curriculum framework that contains A Levels or BTEC qualifications alongside a common core of learning.

A unified framework as an 'organizer' of different curriculum traditions

Unified does not mean uniform. History also suggests that many of the past reforms – ones that endured and most that did not – continue to merit consideration insofar as they were invariably trying to resolve a problem of student participation, attainment or progression. Initiatives have included introducing a wider range of subjects and more modern versions of them; improving attainment in core competences such as mathematics and English; trying to increase the uptake of 'difficult' academic subjects; the modularization of subjects and assessment; introducing an element of research and inquiry or making vocational education more attractive and high status.

We see, therefore, the potential of a Type 3 unifying framework not so much as an alternative to Reform Types 1 and 2, but as an 'organiser' of elements of the all three curriculum traditions of the past 30 years. These could include the *broadening of general education* by, for example, by the introduction of a strong research approach; *enriching vocational education* by enhancing the practical aspects of technical and work-based learning but also including relevant strands of general education; and reinforcing the *linkages approach* by promoting a core of learning that organizes common curriculum components and wider activities beyond the taught curriculum.

We have remarked at several points in this paper that there is not a dominant baccalaureate tradition in England, although the current models do share important features. As part of our work with the emergent National Baccalaureate Trust we have tried to illustrate a pluralist approach by virtue of a 'Glastonbury' metaphor. We would like to suggest that the space for baccalaureate development is not seen as a single big tent that you invite people to join, but rather as a field at Glastonbury that contains many small tents (e.g. the different baccalaureate schemes; the different curriculum traditions, including those coming from conservative sources, and the different providers). The field provides the space for interested parties to participate and contribute to the creation of a common movement by virtue of their dialogue and co-construction of curriculum and qualifications framework for USE.

The importance of the regional and local

The development of a new baccalaureate consensus will not just have to be negotiated nationally; there will be key areas of development regionally and locally. Government policy, and also proposals from Opposition Parties, all promise greater devolution of powers to the local level, although policy realities often suggest the opposite. However, the ongoing debate surrounding policy devolution could provide a strong impetus for a bottom-up baccalaureate movement that seeks to move beyond the narrowness of the curriculum and the fragmentation of local arrangements. The unified baccalaureate framework might not only be an organizer of different curricula, but also a contributor to an organizing mechanism locally as it presents a broad framework that brings different social partners together to provide an improved range of learning and progression opportunities for 14-19 year olds in an area. Nevertheless, history suggests that while bottom-up curriculum movements can play an important role in developing a basis of professional practice, they do not in themselves secure a reformed landscape. That eventually has to come from government carrying out its national co-ordinating and funding role.

A loose and devolved unified framework will need underpinning values and purposes

A striking feature of our USE system, due in part to its single-subject approach and marketised organization, is the absence of an underpinning set of values and purposes. But a unified and pluralistic curriculum and qualifications framework that seeks to bring together different traditions; offer learning, attainment and progression opportunities to 100 per cent of the learner cohort; and provide a site of collaboration between different stakeholders, will need to develop a clear set of values and a sense of common purpose. Amongst the many different themes for consideration we think that the following are of particular importance - a commitment to universal learner participation, attainment and progression; to the qualities of inquiry, creativity and perseverance; and nurturing partnership to support the economy and society, particularly at the local level.

The multiple requirements of a policy learning approach

We conclude by arguing that the different dimensions of a policy learning approach are required to creatively interpret global trends; to understand our own history; its legacies and opportunities; and the ways in which curriculum and qualifications reform relates to wider changes in organization, funding and the policy process. But what we have rehearsed in this Conclusion is an additional argument. A policy learning approach is also needed to usher in a baccalaureate era in England by drawing together a range of bottom-up initiatives and professional practices. This will encourage a climate in which it is possible reach out across the political spectrum by showing that an expansive unified framework has a space for different curriculum ideas that not only exist in harmony, but also in creative tension.

References

- Alexiadou, N. and Lange, B. (2014): Europeanizing the National Education Space? Adjusting to the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) in the UK, *International Journal of Public Administration*, DOI: [10.1080/01900692.2014.934836](https://doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2014.934836)
- Ananiadou, K. and Claro, M. (2009) *21st Century Skills and Competences for New Millennium Learners in OECD Countries*, OECD Education Working Papers, No. 41, OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/218525261154>
- Burdett, N. (2012) *An overview of upper secondary curriculum and qualifications strategies in a sample of countries*. Slough: NFER.
- Dearing R. (1996) *Review of Qualifications for 16-19 Year Olds*, London: SCAA.
- Dufaux, S. (2012) *Assessment for Qualification and Certification in Upper Secondary Education: A review of country practices and research evidence*, OECD Education Working Paper No. 83, Paris: OECD.
- El Kogali, S. (2012) *Reforming Secondary Education – Lessons from International Experience*, Workshop on Reforming Upper Secondary Education Amman, Jordan, December 2-3, The World Bank: http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EDUCATION/Resources/278200-1121703274255/1439264-1354220911166/8958525-1354892093747/El-Kogali-Secondary_Education_EN.pdf.
- Finegold, D., Keep, E., Miliband, D., Raffe, D., Spours, K. and Young, M. (1990) *A British Baccalaureate: overcoming divisions between education and training*. London: IPPR.
- Gordon, J., Halasz, G., Karawczyk, M., Leney, T., Michel, A., Pepper, D., Putkiewicz, E. and Wisniewski, J. (2009) *Key competences in Europe: opening doors for lifelong learning across the school curriculum and teacher education* Warsaw: Centre for Social and Economic Research.
- Halász, G. and Michel, A. (2011) Key Competences in Europe: interpretation, policy formulation and implementation, *European Journal of Education*, 46 (3), 289-306.

- Higham, J. and Yeomans, D. (2007) Policy memory and policy amnesia in 14-19 education: learning from the past? in D. Raffe and K. Spours (eds) *Policy-making and policy learning in 14-19 education*, London Bedford Way Papers, Institute of Education
- Hodgson, A. and Spours, K. (1997) 'From the 1991 White Paper to the Dearing Report: a conceptual and historical framework for the 1990s' in A. Hodgson and K. Spours (eds) *Dearing and Beyond: 14-19 Qualifications Frameworks and Systems*, London; Kogan Page.
- Hodgson, A. and Spours, K. (2003a) *Beyond A Levels: Curriculum 2000 and the Reform of 14-19 Qualifications*, London: Kogan Page.
- Hodgson, A. and Spours, K. (2003b) 'A Chance for an Inclusive and Unified English Baccalaureate System from 14+?' *Forum* 45 (2) 53-57.
- Hodgson, A. and Spours, K. (2007) Specialised Diplomas: transforming the 14-19 landscape in England? *Journal of Education Policy* 22 (6) 657-674.
- Hodgson, A. and Spours, K. (2008) *Education and Training 14-19: Curriculum, qualifications and organization*, London: Sage.
- Hodgson, A. and Spours, K. (2012) *Towards a universal upper secondary education system in England: A unified and ecosystem vision*, Inaugural Professorial Lecture, Institute of Education, University of London. <http://www.ioe.ac.uk/about/64352.html>
- Hodgson, A. and Spours, K. (2014a) 'Heavy fog in the channel - continent cut off': reform of upper secondary education from the perspective of English exceptionalism *European Educational Research Journal* 13 (6) 683-698.
- Hodgson, A. and Spours, K. (2014b) *Upper secondary education across the countries of the UK: possibilities for expansive policy learning* Paper presented to the ECER Conference, 2 September, Porto.
- Labour's Independent Skills Taskforce (2014) *Qualifications matter: improving the curriculum and assessment for all*. Available at: http://www.yourbritain.org.uk/uploads/editor/files/Skills_Taskforce_3rd_report.pdf Accessed 10 June 2015

- Lasonen, J. and Young, M. (1998) *Strategies for achieving parity of esteem in European upper secondary education*. Finland: University of Jyväskylä.
- Le Metais, J. (2002) *International developments in upper secondary education: context, provision and issues*. INCA Thematic Study No. 8, London: Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.
- Lucas, G. (2003) 'The Graduation Certificate' in G. Philips and T. Pound (eds) *The Baccalaureate: A Model for Curriculum Reform*, London: Kogan Page.
- Mathieson, M. (1992) From Crowther to Core Skills *Oxford Review of Education* 18, 3, 185-199.
- National Commission on Education (1995) *Learning to succeed: the way ahead*. London: NCE.
- Pound, T. (2003) The resistance to reform: from Crowther to Curriculum 2000 in G. Philips and T. Pound (eds) *The Baccalaureate: A Model for Curriculum Reform*, London: Kogan Page
- Pring, R. (1995) *Closing the Gap: Liberal education and vocational preparation*, London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Raffe, D. (1997) 'The Scottish experience of reform: from 'Action Plan' to 'Higher Still' in A. Hodgson and K. Spours (eds) *Dearing and Beyond: 14-19 Qualifications Frameworks and Systems*, London; Kogan Page.
- Raffe, D., Howieson, C., Spours, K. and Young, M. (1998) The Unification of Post-Compulsory Education: Towards a Conceptual Framework *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 46 (2) 169–187.
- Raffe, D. (2011) *Policy borrowing or policy learning? How (not) to improve education systems*, CES Briefing, No. 57. Centre for Educational Sociology, University of Edinburgh.
- Royal Society (1991) *Beyond GCSE: a report by a Working Group of the Royal Society's Education Committee*. London: The Royal Society.
- Sahlberg, P. (2007) *Secondary education in OECD countries: common challenges, differing solutions*. Turin: European Training Foundation.
- Sixth Form Colleges' Association (SFCA) (2015) *Costing the sixth form curriculum*. London: SFCA.

- Stanton, G. (1997) 'Unitization: Developing a common language for describing achievement' in A. Hodgson and K. Spours (eds) *Dearing and Beyond: 14-19 Qualifications Frameworks and Systems*, London: Kogan Page.
- The Guardian (2015) *Labour could ditch GCSEs within 10 years, says Tristram Hunt*, 22 April 2015 Available at:
http://www.yourbritain.org.uk/uploads/editor/files/Skills_Taskforce_3rd_report.pdf Accessed 10 June 2015.
- Thompson, J., Hayden, M. and Cambridge, J. (2003) 'Towards a structural typology for baccalaureate style curricula' in G. Philips and T. Pound (eds) *The Baccalaureate: A Model for Curriculum Reform*, London: Kogan Page.
- UNESCO (2005) *Secondary education reform: towards a convergence of knowledge acquisition and skills development* Paris: UNESCO.
- Wheelahan, L. (2013) The future of vocational qualifications depends on a new social settlement. Paper to SKOPE symposium on *The Reform of Vocational Qualifications – Where and what next for England?* Oxford, February 2013.
- Working Group on 14-19 Reform (2004) *14-19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform: Final Report*. London: DfES.
- World Bank (2005) *Expanding opportunities and building competencies for young people: a new agenda of secondary education*. Washington DC: World Bank.
- Young, M. and Leney, T. (1997) 'From A Levels to an advanced level curriculum of the future' in A. Hodgson and K. Spours (eds) *Dearing and Beyond: 14-19 Qualifications Frameworks and Systems*, London: Kogan Page.
- Young, M. and Spours, K. (1996) 'Dearing and Beyond: Steps and Stages to a Unified System' *British Journal of Education and Work*, 9, (3) 5-18.