

# EBacc for all?

The findings from  
SSAT's national survey  
of school leaders

June 2015

## Introduction

Following the announcement by Nick Gibb, minister of state for school reform, on 11 June, that the government was committed to honouring its manifesto pledge to require pupils to study the EBacc, SSAT (the Schools, Students and Teachers Network) – the country's largest schools' membership network, launched a survey for school leaders. The intention was to build a rapid and representative picture of the positions being adopted by school leaders and their responses to the requirement for this academic EBacc curriculum for all.

On 16 June, the secretary of state for education confirmed that this requirement will apply to all students, except those with special educational needs, in all maintained schools, though there is a willingness to explore the particular circumstances of UTCs and studio schools which may qualify for an exemption. Ofsted will be unable to award its highest ratings to schools that refuse to teach the EBacc to all pupils.

Schools will choose, therefore, to teach the EBacc to all, or to accept that they cannot be judged to be 'outstanding' by Ofsted.

Some schools will already be 'outstanding' and their leaders may have to forego that status – which may have implications for their existing work as NLEs and teaching schools.

Some schools will be on the journey to 'outstanding', but will perhaps have to accept that there is a ceiling of 'good', beyond which they cannot pass, unless they redesign their curriculum to make all EBacc subjects a requirement.

The plan is that all pupils who start secondary school in September 2015, and who will start Y10 in 2018, will be required to be entered

for GCSE exams in the full EBacc suite. There is to be a period of consultation, but the government will focus on how this initiative will be implemented, rather than on if it should be implemented. It is hoped that this survey and its findings will be of value in the consultation exercise.

## A spectrum of views

Clearly there is a wide spread of opinion and it is valuable to draw on as many different views as possible if we are to understand the thinking among school leaders about how this might impact on their schools and students.

- The government are positioning the debate very much in its agenda to raise aspirations and achievement among more vulnerable and disadvantaged learners. Some schools are doing the same.
- A number of Arts organisations have expressed the view that a focus on the EBacc will pose a threat to non-EBacc subjects.
- Some schools, of course, are worried about curriculum time (the impact on non-EBacc subjects), option choices (the choices available to students according to their aptitudes and abilities), staff recruitment (the skills required of the staff and the importance of recruiting according to the new curriculum requirements) and/or a one-size-fits-all curriculum (the notions of pathways and personalisation may need some reworking).

## How did we get to this point?

When the last government announced the proposed new accountability measures for secondary schools, many felt that the move from 5+A\*-CEM to Progress 8 was a good thing. Less focus on the C/D borderline; more emphasis on progress rather than raw attainment; greater attention paid to eight subjects, not just five. This all made sense.

Yes, the EBacc measure would still be reported in the performance tables but would not be a determining factor in the floor standards.

Schools were encouraged to enter more students for EBacc subjects; to do otherwise, we were told, would be to do the young people a disservice because their chances of getting into the best universities and of securing the best jobs would suffer if they did not qualify in the more rigorous and aspirational disciplines.

However, the EBacc was not compulsory. There was a broad understanding that it was not suitable for all students. Years of personalisation and flexible curriculum pathways had shown us that a critical tool in engaging learners was an accessible, appropriate and individualised (as far as possible) curriculum.

And it seemed that the government agreed:

**'We expect some schools to offer EBacc subjects to many more pupils as a result of these accountability reforms.'**

*Update on Progress 8 measure and reforms to secondary school accountability framework, DfE, January 2014*

Many more pupils, but not all.

And earlier this year, there seemed to be an understanding that curriculum and qualifications

were not best served by a one-size-fits-all approach. Not everyone can or should go to a Russell Group university. Not everyone can or should pursue academic studies. If that were to happen, the lack of variety in workplace skills and opportunities, everyone knew, would result in social and economic meltdown in no time.

And there was a commonly expressed view that if all pupils were to be pushed along a single (EBacc) curriculum pathway, the consequent risk would be heightened disaffection and disengagement among less academic learners.

But schools were told that they only had to enter students for EBacc subjects, 'where appropriate':

**'Schools should continue to focus on which qualifications are most suitable for individual pupils, as the grades pupils achieve will help them reach their goals for the next stage of their education or training.'**

*Progress 8 measure in 2016 and 2017, Guide for maintained secondary schools, academies and free schools, DfE, March 2015*

Furthermore, Progress 8, we were told, did not demand all EBacc subjects. The EBacc category could be filled with three sciences and no humanities or languages at all. Essentially, at least one, if not two of the EBacc disciplines were optional, as far as the school's Progress 8 performance measure was concerned.

What is more, the government told us that it might even be advantageous to more vulnerable, less able, learners, to follow fewer subjects. If you impose the study of French on a statemented EAL student, he may conscientiously spend so much time trying to

master the necessary skills and content for his French GCSE that his other studies suffer.

'It can be of more benefit to less-able students to strive for 'good' grades (and hence score more points) in fewer subjects, with the emphasis on doing well in English and mathematics, than to take more subjects but achieve lower grades overall.'

*Factsheet: Progress 8 measure 2014 and 2015, DfE, Feb 2014*

## A manifesto promise

'We will require secondary school pupils to take GCSEs in English, maths, science, a language and history or geography, with Ofsted unable to award its highest ratings to schools that refuse to teach these core subjects.'

*Conservative Manifesto, 2015*

## The case for the EBacc being a requirement for all

Those who express support for this requirement say that:

1. If it is aspirational and right for my child, should it not be right for all young people? How will we close the attainment gap if we do not have equal expectations of young people from all points of the social spectrum? A child's background is not an excuse for lower achievement. Nor does social disadvantage equate to low achievement potential, of course.

2. The EBacc is a lever for social mobility and it must not be the preserve of the more advantaged sections of society. Socio-economic disadvantage is not the same thing as low ability at all, and this aspirational suite of qualifications is not only as important to less privileged young people, it is actually more important to them. These are the young people who desperately need the keys to open doorways to a successful adult and working life.
3. Recent research carried out by the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, an independent body which monitors whether youngsters from poorer backgrounds have the same opportunities in the workplace, tells us that employers at elite companies are 'systematically excluding' candidates if they are not middle or upper class. It was found that 70% of 'elite' job offers went to graduates educated at selective state or fee-paying schools.

## The survey findings

### Respondents

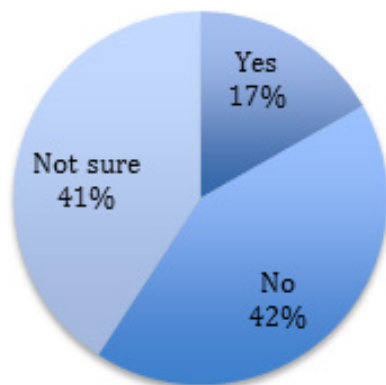
In the first three days of the survey, 1500 responses were received. The total number received when the survey closed was 1664. The responding schools were almost all community schools and academies (91.5%). Eighty-eight per cent of responses came from 'good' (58.7%) or 'outstanding' (29.3%) schools. Responding schools catered for a predominantly more able student grouping with only 34.4% described as below average. Just over 1% of respondents already offer the EBacc to all, while in almost 40% of schools the full EBacc is followed by more than one pupil in two. This represents with

a high degree of accuracy the national picture, in terms of both pupil ability distribution and Ofsted judgement.

*The headline finding*

Only 17% of respondents said that they would make the EBacc compulsory if that were a requirement for an 'outstanding' judgement from Ofsted, while 42% were certain that they would not. As would be expected, a nuanced and varied picture lay behind this headline finding. Through an analysis of the responses to 16 multiple-choice questions and 4 opportunities to expand on their answers in greater detail, the following major themes emerged.

Fig 1. If an Ofsted 'outstanding' judgement required EBacc for all, will you make the EBacc compulsory?

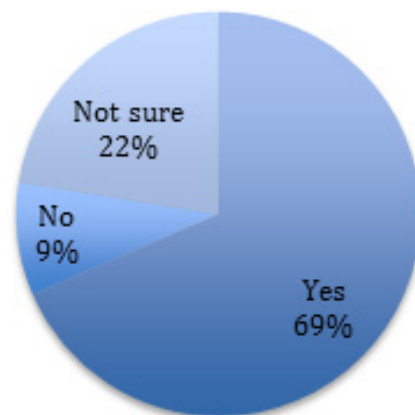


*The appropriateness of one path for all*

Sixty-nine per cent of respondents would refuse to teach the EBacc for all, even if that meant a ceiling of Ofsted 'good' for their schools. Of the respondents from 'outstanding' schools, 47% would refuse to teach the EBacc for all, even if it meant losing their 'outstanding' status, while a further 33% remain undecided. Only 1 in 5 respondents from 'outstanding' schools said that

they would make the EBacc compulsory for all.

Fig 2. Would you consider 'refusing to teach' EBacc for all even if that meant accepting a ceiling of Ofsted 'good'?



Respondents offering their reasons for this quite startling set of results were often in favour, in theory, of the academically rigorous curriculum that the EBacc sets out and regularly stated that they thought it should be available to all:

'The EBacc should be available for all students to study but should not be compulsory.'

'I agree with much of what the Government says and 100% believe in rigour and an academic curriculum but...'

'I believe it should be available to all to study if they wish. I do not believe it should be compulsory.'

'EBacc should be available to all but the student should have the option to follow their interests.'

However, there were no respondents who thought that it was the right path for all of their students:

'...but to make full EBacc compulsory will damage self-esteem and overall outcomes for some students. It will add to anxiety that the current accountability structure has already magnified – mental health of teenagers is already a significant issue for schools.'

'I shall continue to encourage all students who will benefit from doing the EBacc to take that route but it is certainly not for all.'

'I would have little problem with a mandated core academic study for the 60 or so percent of pupils likely to succeed in it. I only foresee misery and failure for the 'forgotten' half of children under this measure.'

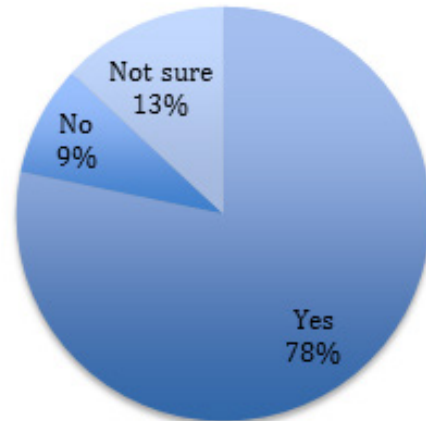
'I think there is a social justice case for NOT forcing all students to do EBacc. In our current model, where all students can meet Progress and Attainment 8 but not all do EBacc, we can maximise progression route opportunities for all.'

### Subject choice

Strongly linked to the idea of appropriate curriculum pathways for individual students is the issue of subject choice.

Only 9% of respondents said that their school would not have to make cuts to other subjects on the curriculum in order to accommodate the EBacc for all.

Fig 3. Would you need to cut certain subjects or reduce their curriculum time in order to teach EBacc for all?



The most commonly cited subjects under threat among the 78% of respondents who were certain of the need for cuts to non-EBacc subjects in their schools were technologies, arts, PE, RE. The reason for this appears to be that the addition of MFL and history/geography to the compulsory core reduces the amount of teaching periods available for optional subjects in the course of a normal school week.

'Other subjects would inevitably be squeezed by EBacc for all as fewer students would opt for technology, music, art and business studies.'

'...this would mean we reduce subjects that have an enormous impact on the school in terms of culture, breadth of curriculum and engagement.'

'This goes against the broad and balanced curriculum entitlement statement in the national curriculum.'

Furthermore, 70% of respondents said that their school would have to reduce their vocational offer and a further 14% are not certain of the

future of vocational learning at this stage. This inevitable reduction in the vocational offer and the lack of any place for an equal value vocational route within secondary education was referred to often in the written responses to the survey:

'In countries where a traditional academic suite of qualifications is built into an expected core offer (e.g. Abitur study in Germany, Bac in France) these sit alongside a strong provision for approximately half to 60% of students who are more vocationally motivated from age 14 or so. This vocational learning model is completely absent from the department's thinking, to the detriment of these proposals.'

'For a society that needs creativity and people with technical skills, this is an unintelligent step.'

'...Much better to have the expectation that 'most' students will follow the EBacc, with up to 20% having a more vocational curriculum better suited to their needs and which enables them to 'achieve' something.'

### *Shifting the focus from the needs of individual students*

There was a feeling that, just in the way that the EBacc did not cater to the needs of those students who would benefit from a gold-standard vocational route, it did not chime with the recent drives to personalise education to match the diverse needs of every student as far as possible.

'EBacc for all does not sit well with the importance of dealing with students as individual human beings.'

'Students are all individuals with no two students having the exact same skill set, and the curriculum should reflect this. In society we need people with a diverse skill set, surely therefore, our curriculum should guide them to a pathway best suited for their individual needs, leading to a country with experts in a range of fields.'

'I believe in the principle of getting the best for everyone but this must take into account the individual child. It is ironic that the government on one hand talks about individualism and personalisation yet they are trying to shape society through a depersonalised curriculum. In today's society this will simply not work and indeed is not beneficial.'

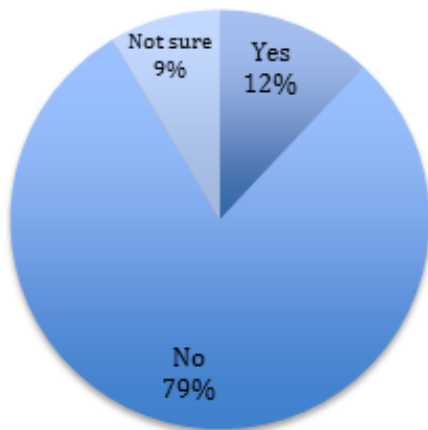
There was a strong sense that MFL would be particularly problematic for some students:

'If other languages were added to the acceptable MFL list that might help a school like ours with high numbers of EAL students. How can a boy recently arrived in the country be expected to take French or German GCSE when he already speaks Lithuanian or Latvian and is learning English as a foreign language?'

'Our school historically made it a requirement for all pupils to take an MFL option at KS4 and we breathed a huge sigh of relief when it was removed from the compulsory GCSE option blocking system. Parents were delighted, pupils felt empowered, and staff relieved.'

Only 12% of respondents felt that the EBacc for all would benefit students. 80% felt there would be no benefit, with a further 8% unsure.

Fig 4. Do you believe that any of your students would benefit from a policy of EBacc for all?



Conversely, 94% of respondents felt that students would be disadvantaged by a compulsory EBacc curriculum, with a further 2% still unsure. The overwhelming view was that the EBacc requirement would benefit the more able but disadvantage the less able:

‘Another example how schools with above average intake will be able to take it in their stride and their students succeed even further, whereas schools with lower ability intakes in challenging circumstances will have another measure they will find hard to meet and therefore the EBacc for all will be another stick with which to beat us.’

‘Appropriate for some but would make the less able switch off from secondary education – creating discipline problems that do not exist at present.’

‘These changes are actually about introducing a greater divide and putting education further out of reach for many middle ability and less able children – regardless of their class!’

### *A retrograde step running counter to the professionalisation of teaching*

It seemed that many respondents felt that, in shifting the focus from the needs of individual students, it is a policy that preferences centralised control over nuanced decision-making by professional educationalists.

‘We should be able to choose a curriculum that best suits the students in our school.’

‘School leaders are best placed to decide on the most appropriate, personalised pathways for their students, looking at the context of their school. A one-size-fits-all approach to schools, and to curriculum within schools, is inappropriate and unhelpful.’

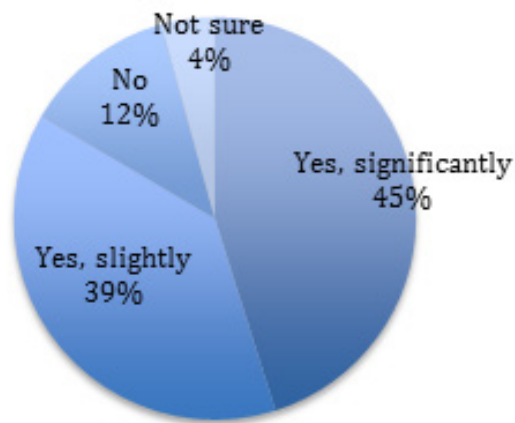
‘Please allow educationalists to decide what is best for our students: we are teachers because we care about our students and for no other statistical reason. We would never allow our students to follow an inappropriate curriculum.’

### *Staffing difficulties*

Compounding these conceptual challenges and disagreements was a worry that there would be real, practical staffing difficulties in implementing the policy. Eighty-three per cent of respondents said that their schools would have to change their staffing, with 45% anticipating significant changes required.



Fig 5. Would compulsory EBacc require to you to change the composition / skillset of your staff?



'This would be a disaster. Where will the teachers come from when training and recruitment are in such disarray!'

'It will further increase the shortage of teachers in some subject areas and will also dramatically impact upon budgets as a different staff body would be required.'

'With budget issues as well, how can schools afford the costs to make staff redundant in certain areas where they may have given 20+ years of great service to the students?'

## Conclusion and recommendations

Some respondents felt that the policy would be beneficial for some pupils, especially middle and high attainers who might not otherwise have picked academic subjects. People commented that this group could include a significant proportion of pupils eligible for pupil premium funding, and that this would help to raise their aspirations for FE and HE. There was also a feeling that a curriculum pathway that

preferences traditional, academic subjects over others should be available to all.

However, there is an overwhelming feeling that the EBacc curriculum is not appropriate for all. Pupils with lower prior attainment, those newly arrived to the country, and some with poor literacy, were cited as being 'set up to fail' if forced to study a language and a humanity at GCSE. Many practitioners worried that this could distract students from the core curriculum of English, maths and science and limit the opportunity for these students to undertake rigorous vocational and technical courses. Many teachers suggested that vocational courses provide strong routes into further education, and that some pupils would be disadvantaged by forcing them down a purely academic route.

Furthermore, there was a feeling that, as offering the full EBacc would require other subjects to be cut from the KS4 options, students who had aptitude and interest in the Arts and other creative subjects would miss out. Similarly, students for whom a predominantly STEM curriculum was appropriate would be equally disadvantaged (by the need to study for both a humanity and a language). The resulting changes to the subjects taught under a compulsory EBacc are a worry for many school leaders who already find recruitment of 'good' teachers, across the curriculum, a struggle.

Many respondents chose to comment on the discrepancy between the UK drive for digital and technical skills and this perceived return to a traditional, academic curriculum. School leaders are worried that the EBacc does not allow for sufficient personalisation in the curriculum, or value their professional judgement of what is best for their students. The overriding message in the responses is that while take-up of the EBacc should be available for

all and encouraged for the most able learners, whatever their background, it is not appropriate for all, and will lead to an unhelpful and regressive narrowing of the curriculum.

The following recommendations are offered:

1. As many pupils as possible, on the basis of aptitude, interest, opportunity and ability, should be encouraged to study the EBacc subjects. But schools should be empowered to deploy their professional judgement in deciding the nature of their own curriculum requirements and pathways.
2. Schools should not be penalised for allowing pupils to follow curriculum pathways other than the EBacc. A school can be 'outstanding' without all pupils studying a particular selection of subjects.
3. Take up of the EBacc should be encouraged, but phased in over time, in order that schools can work towards a staff body that has the necessary skills and in order that schools have sufficient time to recruit suitable teachers.
4. In its efforts to drive the rigour agenda, the government needs also to communicate the value of vocational education, the arts and the technologies
5. UTCs and studio schools merit particular consideration. The EBacc curriculum for all is at odds with their vision.

SSAT will be submitting a response to the government consultation on EBacc for all using the findings of this survey.