
Members present: Ian Mearns (acting chair), Miriam Cates, Caroline Ansell, Anna Firth, Angela Richardson

Witnesses:

Alice Barnard, Chief Executive, Edge Foundation;

Tom Richmond, Director, EDSK;

Richard Markham, CEO, IB Schools and Colleges Association (IBSCA);

Kate Grieg, CEO, Coastal Academies Trust, King Ethelbert School

Uptake of the International Baccalaureate

Caroline Ansell asked about the uptake of the International Baccalaureate (IB) and asked about potential barriers.

Richard Markham identified barriers in the reward offered by universities; IB students are not getting favourable offers despite studying more broadly. He noted funding is also an issue because the IB is expensive to run. Further, there is a lack of understanding in comparison to A levels, so he said he needs more endorsement; the surge in IB uptake came from Tony Blair's commitment for an IB school in every district.

Kate Grieg said the IB has had a profound effect on schools in the Coastal Academies Trust combining skills, knowledge and a flexible curriculum which are all current political topics. She acknowledged it's an expensive course and said that is part of why it's not taken up, and because people don't know about it. Schools need more clarity on funding agreements and for BTECs first.

Alice Barnard said a key issue is the curriculum pre-16, as this many teaching practitioners and students don't feel that the IB naturally leads from that. She said we should look at pre-16 education to make it more flexible. She also noted the careers advice and guidance is critical as now, there is not adequate provision in schools which impacts the demand for IB. She also noted the Government has had to remove qualifications to advance the take up of T levels.

Caroline Ansell asked if there had been Ofsted recognition of the strength of IBs.

Kate Grieg said they had; Ofsted have recognised its providing outstanding curriculum and preparation though their inspection of some in their schools.

Caroline Ansell asked about students achieving the entry requirements in English and Maths for the IB.

Kate Grieg said for the IB Diploma Programme (IBDP) English and Maths are continued to 18 while the IB Career-related Programme (IB CP) doesn't require this. If someone doesn't have the English and Maths qualification at 16, they'd do additional learning for English and Maths concurrently with the IB CP.

Reform fatigue

Caroline Ansell asked if teachers have reform fatigue.

Alice Barnard said this is an issue; teachers are often reticent about change which she thought was due to changes not making dynamic differences to young people's outcomes. She thought we should be much more radical in education reform and ensure teachers are brought along on that journey, providing them with scope and framework to allow them a dynamic environment to teach in.

Anna Firth advocated strongly for the IB programme. However, she asked whether it was more suited to smaller class sizes and therefore be limited to elite schools.

Richard Markham said average class sizes aren't the most helpful metric because he has taught in schools where class sizes differ depend on which subject is being taught. He said the preparation of students for further study is aided in an IB school because it impacts the ethos of the whole school's approach to education.

Tom Richmond said it's important when looking at the 16-19 to recognise that other qualifications, like A levels, have minimum entry requirements. T levels originally allowed schools to set minimum entry requirements too. The question of whether the qualification should be demanding and exclusive, would look very different to an inclusive programme which allows students to start at different places. He noted some baccalaureates allow for this.

Alice Barnard said the education system believes A levels and higher education are the standard and the way to be successful; it's embedded in our system in a different way than the continent. She suggested we consider the way that teaching, and learning is applied pre-16, and suggested we should think about education through to 19 rather than a cliff edge at 16.

Schools

Ian Mearns asked if it's possible for schools to run alongside IB's alongside A levels and BTECs.

Richard Markham said the schools do find the means of providing excellent opportunities to undertake both A Levels and IB. He said endorsement and support from the Government to increase funding would be welcome. He added there should be a 3-19 education system which has coherent themes and approaches right the way through the age range.

Kate Greig endorsed increasing funding for 16-19 education. She endorsed offering the IB instead of A levels because they have the same content but also include a skills focus.

Level 3 funding

Ian Mearns asked about the Department's proposals to withdraw level 3 funding which would impact the IB Careers Programme, he asked for the witness's opinion on this.

Alice Barnard said this is a huge concern; she suggested the proposals are dropped and that it's clear to see this has been motivated by the lack of interest in T levels. She said she was concerned that T levels can't be studied alongside other qualifications like BTECs, A levels and the IB can.

Tom Richmond said it is wrong to close a qualification get another initiative off the ground, however it's important that students understand the system and there is evidence on the impact of an overlapping system goes back 30 years. He said he had some sympathy for the DfE on this. He agreed that 11-18 system must be a coherent journey.

Alice Barnard said if we lose BTECs we will lose the IB CP which she said has had a massive positive impact in their schools on coastal deprivation and low aspiration. However, they do need tightening up.

Cohesion in education

Miriam Cates asked how we can persuade children to take a broader range of subjects, or whether we need to broaden the system so children know they won't be able to drop subjects.

Richard Markham noted international examples of broader curriculums mean that no persuasion is necessary. He said having a coherent programme from 3-19 gives flexibility to adapt subjects and the way they are taught, allowing for interdisciplinary teaching.

Kate Grieg said this is a challenge but it's worth doing to ensure children have a wide range of knowledge and skills. She said it's easier to do A levels, so this is a challenge.

Miram Cates asked if keeping students studying English and Maths for longer is dodging the issue that we have low levels of English and Maths at 16-year-olds.

Tom Richmond said keeping English and maths until 18 can mean different things; EDSK designed a course with core English and Maths until 18, which he said had more of a real world focus to GCSE curricula, which he said in maths particularly is very strenuous. He said given where we are with English and Maths levels, requiring young people to continue English and Maths to a very high standard would require significant investment and he didn't think universities and employers would see the benefit.

T levels

Caroline Ansell asked why the Government created T levels rather than looking to the IB landscape to achieve the same goals.

Tom Richmond said the current 16-19 landscape is broadly shaped by outcomes and the demands of universities, and the BA model in the UK requires intensive study before the degree starts, so students on the academic path are well served by this system. Moving away from a narrower specialism would require more funding and would narrow subjects.

Richard Markham said research suggests that IB Diploma students perform better than their A level counterparts at degree level. He thought Government have looked at the IB system, noting both Labour and Conservatives have looked at this over the years. He thought there was hesitancy around moving control to an independent examination provider.

Alice Barnard said she thought this was to do with dogma; she thought the role of education secretary is now seen as a steppingstone to other jobs rather than being aspirational. If the IB isn't something the person in the role has thought of, it just isn't considered. She said we should challenge politicians to come up with sensible cross-party long-term policy which will deliver good outcomes for young people and the economy.

Apsana Begum noted Youth Futures Foundation and the Royal Society have said T levels are large and demanding courses, so she questioned whether they would fit within a baccalaureate system.

Alice Barnard said T levels are already the equivalent of 3 A levels, although she noted guided learning hours vary between qualifications. She said she couldn't see how that would fit with the IB because the ethos is very different; she thought T levels were trying to replicate A levels in a slightly different form. Barnard said if they could be incorporated within other qualifications, she thought this would increase T level uptake.

Richard Markham said if we reduce the content of T levels, they become BTECs again, which he noted do work within the IB model.

Apsana Begum asked for assessments of the roll out of T levels and what reforms might be necessary.

Tom Richmond said T levels as a programme have potential to be a rigorous demanding programme; if you can get the work placement sorted, it could be a very good programme. He noted ensuring work placements for all T level courses and students would be very difficult and require financial incentives. He also said there are issues with the relationship between apprenticeships and T levels which EDSK don't think have been explored in enough detail.

Alice Barnard expressed concern that opportunity will be about what is available locally; she questioned whether this means the T level offered to students has to be based on the local economy, which she thought would negatively impact levelling up. She agreed with Richmond's comments on work placements.

Funding

Angela Richardson spoke about differing opinions on whether the IB would be a more expensive model to A levels and asked for the witnesses' thoughts.

Richard Markham said the demands placed on schools in terms of Maths and English GCSE means we have a wealth of teachers able to teach to a high level; the upskilling of those people might not be too expensive. However, he thought there might be issues in upskilling of teachers in shortage subjects like languages and sciences.

Tom Richmond said this comes down to structure of education in this country; although 11-18 is the most common type of secondary institution, there are hundreds of only 16-18 providers that can't do cross subsidisation. Most colleges have shrunk their offering from 4 courses per pupil to 3 as is and he couldn't imagine them expanding this out again.