In 2010 the Government introduced the English Baccalaureate (not a Welsh or Northern Irish one). It is not actually a qualification: it simply recognises the achievement of those pupils who gain grades C and above at GCSE in every one of the five government-approved ‘core’ subjects, i.e. maths, science, English, a foreign language (including Latin and Greek) and a humanity (including Ancient History, but not Classical Studies). They were selected because the Russell Group of universities considered them ‘most likely to be required or preferred for entry to degree courses and ones that will keep the most options open’.

On September 17 2012 the Government announced that the EBacc was in fact the first move in abolishing GCSEs and replacing them with EBCs: English Baccalaureate Certificates. In 2015, for examination in 2017, it is proposed that GCSEs in maths, science and English will be replaced with EBCs. Soon after, languages and humanities will join them. Until then, the EBacc will be awarded on a combination of EBCs and GCSEs. Eventually, EBacc subjects will be examined by EBCs alone. Whether all subjects will eventually become EBCs is not clear.

Further changes are envisaged. Each EBacc subject will be examined by just one board (perhaps with a five-year franchise). Pupils unfit to sit EBacc subjects at 16 will either take them later or leave school with a ‘detailed record of achievement’. It is also planned to replace league tables with a new way of holding schools accountable that will prevent ‘teaching to the test’.

Classicists will applaud the decision to make Latin and Greek official subjects again after the disaster of Baker’s National Curriculum which acknowledged only modern foreign languages. The absence of Classical Civilisation from the EBacc is, however, another disaster. The problem is that government arguments against its inclusion have changed every time the illogicality of the decision has been pointed out. In other words, the decision is based on no educational principle known to man.

The reason for it, in my view, is that government does not want Classics to overload the EBacc. But we might try renaming Classical Civilisation ‘The History of Classical Culture’ and demand a place, by definition, in the history slot. If the government still refuses – which it will – there might at least be some amusement in asking them why there is no such thing as a history of ‘culture’, or if there is, why it is not allowed to feature under the humanities slot with History and Ancient History.

A word of warning, Governments and ministers come and go. If the sentiments of ex-shadow education minister Andy Burnham are anything to go by, Latin and Greek will not last a millisecond in any Labour administration. Plenty of Tories and Lib Dems would probably feel the same. We have a very brief fenestra opportunitatis to demonstrate just why the languages are worth their place.

EBaccs and EBCs
by Peter Jones

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