

ISSUES PAPER 1

The New 14-19 Diplomas

November 2007

Introduction

Following its three Annual Reports in 2004, 2005 and 2006, the Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training is producing Issues Papers which focus upon specific areas of concern, with a view to widening the debate, testing out tentative conclusions and seeking further evidence.

This Issues Paper asks: *‘What is the purpose of the new 14-19 Diplomas and how will they improve learning and performance in 14-19 education and training in England?’* The government sees them as the main mechanism for raising levels of post-16 participation as part of its drive to involve 100 per cent of learners in education and training up to the age of 18. This paper critically evaluates the role of the new 14-19 Diplomas in the English system, locating them as the latest set of ‘middle-track’ qualifications that have failed in the past. The paper also discusses the implications of the government’s announcement to introduce a further three

Diploma ‘lines’ in Science, Languages and the Humanities. It raises questions about the design, role and identity of all of the new awards, as well as issues of implementation.

The paper concludes by arguing that the Diplomas will only succeed if the government reverts to the original Tomlinson strategy of bringing all qualifications for 14-19 year-olds within a single comprehensive Diploma framework.

The Welsh Assembly Government is pursuing a more unified curriculum and qualifications approach to 14-19 reform in Wales through Learning Pathways 14-19 and The Welsh Bac. A future Nuffield Review Issues Paper explores the implications of the different strategies being developed in two countries which continue to share many of the same qualifications for young people.

What are the Diplomas?

At the heart of the government's 14-19 reforms, announced in early 2005¹, lie the new Diplomas, of which there were initially 14 lines offered at Levels 1 to 3 of the National Qualifications Framework. The first five lines – IT (Information Technology); Society, Health and Development; Construction and the Built Environment; Engineering; Creative and Media – will be available from September 2008. A further five – Land-based and Environmental; Manufacturing; Hair and Beauty; Business Administration and Finance – will be offered from September 2009, followed by Public Services; Sport and Leisure; Retail and Travel and Tourism in September 2010. Originally confined to these 14 vocational areas, in October 2007 the ministerial team at the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) unexpectedly announced its intention to develop three additional Diploma lines in Science, Languages and the Humanities, thus bringing general education subjects into the Diploma suite.²

The Diplomas are 'composite' awards comprising three elements – Principal Learning, which is sector specific; Generic Learning, which aims to provide personal and learning skills including English, mathematics and IT; and Additional/Specialist Learning, which can include other qualifications and units

that allow learners to tailor their programme to meet personal aspirations.

Ministers intend that the awards should provide "an exciting, stretching and relevant programme of learning for young people of all backgrounds and abilities"³ and should prepare them for life and work.

The Diplomas as middle-track qualifications

The original 14 Diplomas can be seen as the latest in a long line of broad vocational qualifications occupying a middle-track position, wedged between a large and culturally dominant academic track and a small but attractive apprenticeship route. In this location, these types of qualifications (e.g. GNVQs – General National Vocational Qualifications) have experienced a mixture of success and failure. Their successes included being regarded as 'motivational' for the disengaged, contributing to full-time 16-19 participation rates, and providing a relatively small but significant alternative route into certain parts of higher education (HE). However, their weaknesses outweighed their strengths. First, and foremost, they never escaped the shadow of A Levels. The most capable learners continued to take A Levels and the very success of broad vocational qualifications in their 'motivational' role meant that they were seen as an 'alternative' curriculum. Second, they failed to articulate adequately with apprenticeships and work-based learning,

¹ Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (2005) *14-19 Education and Skills*, London: DfES.

² Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCFS) (2007) 'Diplomas could become qualification of choice for young people', DCFS Press release 2007/0195, 23 October

³ DfES (2006) *The Specialised Diploma Gateway*. London: DfES, p.3.

another potential source of prestige. Third, they suffered from complex and bureaucratic assessment regimes, contributing to mediocre attainment performance and learner instrumentalism⁴. Fourth, new middle track qualifications were constantly reviewed and re-labelled which compounded the problem of their low visibility and take-up by learners. Hence their fifth weakness, particularly in the case of AVCEs (Advanced Vocational Certificates of Education), was their relative lack of recognition by either HE or employers.

Because the original 14 Diplomas occupy this same middle-track position, the question arises as to which learners will choose them. While the inclusion of new general education lines within the Diploma suite could take the Diploma brand out of the middle-track vocational trap, history suggests that the retention of GCSEs and A Levels, which have historically been accepted as the most prestigious route of study for 14-19 year-olds, may mean that the most able learners (and their parents) will continue to opt for these qualifications. It is

⁴ Further Education Development Agency/Institute of Education/Nuffield Foundation (1997) *General National Vocational Qualifications in the Further Education Sector in England. National Survey Report*. London: FEDA; Williams, S. (1999) Policy tensions in vocational education and training for young people: the origins of general national vocational education. *Journal of Education Policy*, 14 (2) 151-166; Ecclestone, K. (2006) *Assessment in post-compulsory education: Paper 2: commitment and comfort zones: purposes and practices of formative assessment in post-16 programmes*. Paper presented to the British Educational Research Association, University of Warwick, 6-9 September.

unfortunate that the lines in Science, Languages and the Humanities will be developed later than their vocational counterparts. This delay means that the Diploma brand will have to forge its identity as a broad vocational qualification up against traditional GCSEs and A Levels.

Moreover, if Diplomas co-exist with 'tried and tested' vocational qualifications, such as BTEC (Business and Technology Education Council) Diplomas, CGLI (City and Guilds of London Institute) and OCR (Oxford Cambridge and RSA Examinations) awards, their popularity is not assured even among those learners wishing to take more applied or vocational study.

A recent survey of teachers' and further education lecturers' views about the Diplomas⁵ supports this analysis. While 57 per cent of respondents thought that Diplomas were potentially a good idea, 73 per cent did not believe that they would succeed in offering students a genuinely high quality alternative to GCSEs and A Levels, with 90 per cent convinced that the Diplomas would not appeal to students from a middle-class background. Moreover, the majority of lecturers and teachers believed that parents, learners, universities and even teachers themselves would see Diplomas as having lower status than A Levels and GCSEs. The new qualifications also received a lukewarm reception by universities. In a survey of HE admissions officers

⁵ Edge/You Gov (2007) Edge/You Gov research into the Diplomas, available at <http://www.edge.co.uk>, accessed 17 August 2007.

commissioned by ACS International Schools, only four in ten viewed the Diploma as a good alternative to A Levels, with the majority of respondents commenting they thought the new qualification would result in a 'two-tier system'⁶.

Despite the desire of government to see employers in the driving seat of the Diplomas, the Education and Skills Committee on 14-19 Diplomas recorded a relatively cool response from employer organisations, some of which were concerned about lack of involvement and awareness.

Design, role and identity

In their middle-track position, Diplomas are intended to serve a multitude of purposes, raising problems of role and identity. The House of Commons Education and Skills Committee on 14-19 Diplomas summed up this issue: "It has not always been clear to what extent the new programmes are intended to be vocational, or applied, or to serve a more general education purpose". It went on to comment that: "the government's own standpoint on this issue appears to have changed over time"⁷. This remark referred to the way in which the government altered the name of the new awards from 'Specialised Diplomas' in February 2005 to 'Diplomas' in March 2007.

⁶ British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) (2007) 'Universities have Diploma doubts', 27 July, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/6917842.stm>, accessed 13 August 2007.

⁷ House of Commons (HoC) Education and Skills Committee (2007) 14-19 Diplomas: *Fifth Report of Session 2006-07* (HC249). London: The Stationery Office, p.13.

The Diplomas are also intended to serve different groups of learners – those disaffected from education; those who have failed to reach the 5 GCSE A*-C benchmark at 16; those wanting to pursue a high-quality employer recognised qualification and those wanting to prepare for entry to HE. The recent history of broad vocational qualifications suggests that it is difficult to design a single set of separate awards to meet this wide range of needs without compromising one or more of its aims. The GNVQ/AVCE lesson is that confusions about purpose undermine external recognition and value.

So to what extent do the first 14 Diplomas differ from earlier broad vocational qualifications? The answer is: to a degree. They have been designed from the start as 14-19 rather than 16-19 awards; they are more programmatic; they are broader and more flexibly tailored to individual need and can include a mix of academic and vocational study as well as a significant element of generic learning. It is claimed that the Diplomas will be more strongly vocational because of the work-related requirements of both Generic and Principal Learning. Taken together, these differences could be seen as assets in terms of progression, skill development, learner motivation, pedagogy and the promotion of a broader curriculum, and it is undoubtedly these factors that excite the policy advocates of the new awards.

At this point, it is worth reflecting on the experience of BTEC Diplomas, which did not suffer the same fate as other broad vocational qualifications. The difference was that these awards were not designed by government as full-time alternatives to A Levels, and were developed over time

as strongly vocational qualifications with wide support from, and the involvement of, employers, practitioners and later from HE providers. For these reasons they proved to be enduring and relatively successful.

A sequential implementation process

Politicians and civil servants have made a virtue of Diplomas being designed in a completely new way in order to signify the novelty of the initiative and its difference from earlier broad vocational qualifications. The generic template for the Diplomas was primarily developed by private consultants working for QCA, with very little time for full consultation either with qualifications experts or with practitioners. The designers attempted to incorporate some features of the Tomlinson proposals into the Diploma template (e.g. the Extended Project), but did not make significant use of existing vocational qualification designs. This 'blank slate' approach was strongly criticised in the Select Committee Report.

Diploma Development Partnerships (DDPs), who were appointed by the relevant Sector Skills Council (SSC), were in charge of 'populating' the Principal Learning component. However, they did not necessarily have the curriculum expertise required for this task. Furthermore, their credibility to represent the views of employers, particularly small and medium enterprises, has been questioned by employers themselves⁸. It is

difficult, therefore, to see how the government's idea of involving employers in order to ensure their acceptance of the new Diplomas is going to be served by this design process.

Meanwhile, awarding bodies, which had the expertise to contribute to the Diplomas, were only allowed to play a marginal role in the initial design, even though they were later charged with turning the content specifications into qualifications. The final stage in the design process was fulfilled by QCA. As the national regulator, it had overall control of the eventual shape and assessment of the Diplomas. What has occurred, therefore, is a sequential rather than an holistic approach to design, which has resulted in communication problems, variability in content, the divorce of content and assessment and the exclusion of expert inputs.

Practitioners, who have considerable experience of both curriculum development and teaching vocational qualifications, were excluded almost entirely. This is problematic for at least two reasons – practitioners will ultimately be responsible for delivering the new awards and, therefore, need to be brought on board at an early stage; they also have the expertise to point out practical design faults that may otherwise go unnoticed until the implementation phase.

Problems of separating design functions and making the design process less than

⁸ Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA) (2006) *Skills for Business Network 2005: Survey of*

Employers. Research Report 18. Wath-upon-Deerne: SSDA.

⁹ Stanton, G. (2007) Memorandum submitted by Geoff Stanton to the Select Committee on 14-19 Diplomas.

inclusive have been compounded by a rushed implementation timetable. The original date for designing and piloting the 14 Diploma lines was brought forward from 2013 to 2010, with the first five awards being delivered in September 2008, even before the full evaluation of some of its component parts (e.g. functional skills and the project) was complete. Moreover, as part of the Diploma Gateway Process, announced in June 2006, which determined those consortia that would be allowed to pilot the first five lines of the Diplomas, schools and colleges had to make decisions about which Diploma lines to offer and even to indicate how many learners would take the new qualifications, prior to seeing the specifications for the new awards. This meant that they had to market the Diplomas to parents and learners without full knowledge of what they were and how they would be assessed and delivered.

As we have seen, there have been significant concerns about the prognosis for the Diplomas in the first five lines, which include sectors with a reasonable track record of training up to Level 3. These concerns will be compounded in some of the later vocational lines (e.g. retail and hair and beauty) where there is less demand for Level 3 skills and the landscape is dominated by small and medium enterprises. Diplomas in these latter sectors are likely to struggle to achieve parity of esteem with other tried and tested vocational qualifications, apprenticeships.

Institutional collaboration (see Issues Paper 2) is seen as the key to the

successful delivery of the Diplomas. However, as is argued in that paper, 14-19 partnerships between schools, colleges and work-based learning providers are still 'weakly collaborative'. Moreover, although local authorities have been given responsibility for 14-19 learning, they are often still finding their feet in this role¹⁰. A recent survey gives further pause for thought in terms of capacity to deliver the Diplomas¹¹. Among the major concerns expressed by the teacher and lecturer respondents was the unrealistic timetable for reform, with insufficient attention being paid to professional development. Moreover, only 13 per cent believed that current 14-19 partnerships were sufficiently strong to support the successful implementation of the new qualifications.

Design and assessment issues

The middle track location of the Diplomas and their politically determined development and implementation process has thus led to a number of design and assessment complications. These include:

- an 'academic' approach to Principal Learning by some DDPs concerned with chasing parity of esteem;
- variability in the content, level and focus of the first five Diploma lines;
- different approaches to the curriculum across the Diploma lines, raising questions of consistency and parity

¹⁰ Tirrell, J., Winter, A.M. and Hawthorne, S. (2006) *Challenges Facing Partnerships: Current developments towards implementation of 14-19 in local authorities*. Sheffield: LEACAN 14+ Ltd.

¹¹ Edge/You Gov (2007) *ibid.*

between different Diplomas in what is intended to be a single system;

- Level 1 and 2 Diplomas having to meet the needs of 14-16 year-olds still in compulsory education and 16-19 year-olds undertaking post-compulsory study with the risk of repetition of learning;
- a complex assessment regime with different components being assessed in different ways with different grading scales, together with concerns about the amount of external assessment and the constrained nature of internal assessment.

Issues for research, policy and practice

The evidence to date suggests that everyone involved in the reform process regards the first 14 lines of the Diplomas as problematic, but beyond this opinions diverge. The government is resolute in its determination to introduce these new awards, because Diplomas are seen as an essential tool in raising the post-16 participation rate to 100 per cent through providing more choice of provision for learners.

Critics maintain that, whatever their pedagogical merits, the original Diploma plans constituted an historic strategic error. They not only repeated the mistakes of the past as middle-track qualifications, but also deflected considerable resources and energy away from addressing deep-seated problems within the English education and training system, associated with the academic/ vocational divide.

The decision to introduce three new lines in general education has changed the picture somewhat, because it means that the Diplomas begin to go with the flow of the Tomlinson proposals for a unified Diploma system¹². The benefits of this change of heart will be felt almost immediately because all those who supported Tomlinson will see some evidence of a longer-term vision for a more comprehensive 14-19 phase with a wider range of schools and teachers becoming involved with the Diploma developments. 14-19 Pathfinders can experiment with the new lines at a local level, drawing in the vast majority of learners at Key Stage 4 who will be able to take a Diploma as part of a broad programme of study. Higher education too can become a more active partner in Diploma development.

However, as long as A Levels remain as discrete qualifications, it is difficult to see Diplomas becoming what the Secretary of State for DCSF described as the 'qualification of choice' for young people. Moreover, given that the academic/vocational divide has been breached by this announcement, it makes sense for the government to go a step further and declare A Levels part of a unified Diploma framework covering all forms of learning for 14-19 year-olds. Currently, its position is ambiguous.

Given this context, how should practitioners and policy makers respond?

¹² Working Group on 14-19 Reform (2004) 14-19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform: Final Report of the Working Group. London: DfES.

¹³ DCSF (2007) *ibid.*

Key Messages

1. The Review thinks it is important that practitioners fully engage with the reforms to improve provision and progression for learners. Work by 14-19 Pathfinders suggests that the Diplomas will have a positive role to play at Levels 1 and 2 in Key Stage 4 as part of a strategy to broaden and modernise the upper secondary curriculum¹⁴. Their position at Level 3, and in relation to A Levels is less assured.
2. The government should learn from the problems associated with the design and implementation process to date. All partners, and particularly practitioners, who are responsible for making the reforms work, should be fully involved at all points in the reform process.
3. The government should recognise the position of BTEC and other existing vocational qualifications that currently play a positive role, particularly post-16. It is clear from our research that providers wish to continue to offer these popular and specialised titles. They should be reviewed alongside all other qualifications for 14-19 year-olds.
4. The government should now make it clear that A Levels and GCSEs will, over time, come within the Diploma framework so that all 14-19 year-olds can benefit from broader programmes

of study containing both theoretical and applied learning. If every young person took a Diploma of one sort or another, then the Diploma brand would be assured. This decision cannot be delayed until 2013 because, despite the announcement of the three more general lines, all Diplomas will suffer in the shadow of A Levels.

The following people have been involved in the production of this Issues Paper: Ann Hodgson, Ewart Keep and Ken Spours. The ideas of the paper were discussed and elaborated on as a result of discussion with the Nuffield Review Advisory Committee, Nuffield Review Core Group and the 14-19 Alliance.

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¹⁴ DfES 14-19 website on 14-19 Pathfinders, available at http://www.dfes.gov.uk/14-19/dsp_pathfinders.cfm?sid=9&pid=214&ctype=TEXT&ptype=Single, accessed 17 August 2007.