

Diploma Discussion Paper

Background

The new Diploma is the latest in a series of Government-led reforms designed to promote an alternative, more applied, set of awards for those whose needs are not well served by a curriculum based on established academic GCSE and A Level qualifications. The Diploma itself, and the way in which it has been developed, contain some novel features. There are indications that, where it is well-planned, and delivered effectively, it can motivate and enthuse young people not attracted to more traditional courses, and help them develop skills that will enable them progress successfully in general education or work-related training. However, in common with other similar initiatives that have failed over the past 30 years, there are already signs that it is struggling to establish itself successfully alongside other better known and understood, and in many respects well-regarded, qualifications.

This note briefly summarises the main concerns and practical difficulties that have arisen about the Diploma, in terms of its design and its position within a 'tracked' qualifications framework. It goes on to suggest a more effective approach to the development of a curriculum and qualification model with some similarities in concept to the Diploma, which could address these concerns and thus increase the prospects of success in achieving what has proved the elusive goal of reforming the 14-19 qualifications system.

Concerns over the design and delivery of the Diploma

A complex model: The Diploma contains several different elements – the Principal Learning [PL], units of Additional and Specialist Learning [ASL], Functional Skills [FS] and the

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Extended Project Qualification [EPQ]. The model itself is not widely understood and can be difficult to explain to prospective students and parents. There are also technical difficulties, particularly in the assessment (where students have to achieve nine separate elements) and the way the overall Diploma is graded.

Absence of a proper pilot: Although Diplomas have been designed and developed over a lengthy period, teachers, lecturers and other education professionals were not fully engaged in this process and awarding bodies only became involved at a relatively advanced stage. This may have contributed to some lack of ownership among those responsible for delivering Diplomas. Perceived teething problems might have been identified and addressed more effectively if the first year of implementation had been presented as a pilot stage with full independent evaluation.

Difficulties in providing a comprehensive offer: The model allows for a vast range of different combinations of units, particularly in terms of the ASL elements. In practice, however, it is proving difficult for institutions, or even consortia, to offer sufficient breadth of options that enable students to tailor the course to their particular interests and needs. To date ASL has often comprised readily available GCSE, A Level and other long-standing qualification units.

Functional Skills requirements: As happened with the GNVQ, there is already evidence that the requirement to achieve the FS units at the same level as the Diploma itself (for Level 1 and 2 awards) runs the risk of producing high failure rates.

Institutional collaboration: It has been recognised from the outset that no single institution can offer the full range of provision to deliver all the Diploma lines, and a consortium approach has been one of the main requirements for successful bids to run the Diploma. There are

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examples of highly successful consortia arrangements in some areas, often building on previous initiatives to promote collaboration in the delivery of 14-19 learning. However the model undoubtedly gives rise to significant practical and logistical difficulties (such as the need for aligned timetabling, transport issues and co-ordination over assessment and responsibility for individual students). There is emerging evidence that commitment to consortia working varies appreciably in different areas and between institutions in the same locality.

Employer involvement: Employers were given a leading role in the design of the Diploma through the Diploma Development Partnerships, and it is clear that commitment remains strong among the national representative bodies involved with the different Diploma lines. However employer involvement at local level is proving more problematic and the recession appears to be having an adverse impact on the availability of good quality work experience placements that form an important part of all Diploma learning programmes.

Costs: Diplomas are undoubtedly much more expensive to deliver than most other programmes for 14-19 year-old learners. This has been recognised in the early stages of the programme and the Government has invested large sums in the design and initial roll-out of the programme, amounting to over £500 million so far. Even this figure hides some of the costs, for example those arising from the need for partnership working and planning. In the current economic climate there are understandable concerns that current funding levels are unsustainable and that the Diploma will not achieve the critical mass that will allow it to be delivered more cost effectively.



Problems arising from the position of the Diploma within a `tracked' system

The previous Government presented the Diploma as one track within a three- or four-track system for 14-19 learning, which also comprises general education (GCSEs and A Levels), vocational programmes (Apprenticeships) and Foundation Learning. Initially the Diploma appeared as the only qualification in the `middle' track: it was envisaged that Diplomas would replace or subsume established awards (such as BTEC and City and Guilds qualifications). Later the Government relaxed its stance so that these awards no longer seem under imminent threat from the Diploma.

Initial take-up of the Diploma has proved well below original expectations. In the first two cohorts (2008 and 2009) official figures put the total number of participants at some 37,500, compared with the original target of 150,000. The vast majority of these have enrolled on Level 2 Diploma courses at Key Stage 4, often involving delivery in partnership with FE colleges. Take-up to date at Levels 1 and 3, and among post-16 students is very low. There are also early indications that some Diploma programmes planned for 2010 will not run. This suggests that there is a potential market for the Diploma as an alternative to a predominantly GCSE- based programme for 14-16 year olds. However beyond this, where it faces competition from more established awards, the prospects appear much less favourable. Although the majority of FE colleges are supporting Diplomas as an additional route, they do not see them becoming the 'qualification of choice' in preference to better known BTEC or City and Guilds awards that retain popularity with students and employers.

Despite its differences from previous attempts at reform, the Diploma is facing many of the same difficulties in achieving recognition and status alongside existing programmes and qualifications. To an extent this reflects the perception of risks and uncertainties associated

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with the new award, of which the main ones are:

Effect on school and college performance: The importance attached to school and college performance tables as a measure of success inevitably leads institutions to offer those programmes likely to deliver good results in terms of student outcomes. In addition to the uncertainty associated with any new qualification, the Diploma is suffering from the perception that the requirement to achieve FS is likely to have an adverse impact on overall success rates; and the fact that it is a significantly 'bigger' qualification than most others at this level, thus limiting the scope for students to take a combination of separately awarded qualifications. The inclusion of FS as a requirement inevitably raises issues of 'fairness' with other qualifications (notably GCSEs and A Levels), which can be achieved without acquiring functional skills.

Uncertain progression: In principle Diploma students are expected to be able to progress to further learning in any of the three pathways, or into jobs. Whether this will prove to be the reality is less clear. There are concerns as to whether it will be sensible for students who have taken a Level 2 Diploma at Key Stage 4 to progress through a Level 3 Diploma post-16, since this may involve considerable repetition of similar types of learning.

Attitude of HE: Considerable efforts are being made to ensure that HE understands the Diploma and recognises its benefits as a preparation for degree-level study (not least the FS and EPQ elements). Most universities have indicated that they will be prepared to consider applicants offering the Diploma. However it is clear that the more prestigious and selective HEIs will attach tight conditions to offers (for example by specifying the particular ASL units required for specific courses). Unless students know about these conditions at the outset of their studies, and are able to access the relevant units as part of their programme, they are

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likely to find that some relevant courses are not available to them. Universities might also be expected to become more selective as the pressure on admissions increases, which in turn could lead to greater reliance on `trusted` A Levels and less willingness to accept Diploma awards.

Lack of clarity as to main target groups: The Diploma has been promoted on the basis that it is suitable for a very wide range of students of all ability levels. However this has meant that there is no clear understanding of which groups of student it can benefit most. The raising of the age of participation and the promise of an `entitlement` will produce a need for a wider range of less academic courses at Level 3 and (particularly) Level 2 post-16. Yet it is far from clear that the Diploma in its current form will meet this need for many young people. In some areas it already risks becoming stigmatised at KS4 as a programme for challenging or lower achieving students, which is likely to have a knock-on impact on its perception as an option post-16. At the same time there are signs that it may prove too challenging for the most disadvantaged learners commonly found within the NEETS group. At the other end of the spectrum, there is no indication at this stage that it will be supported by the independent sector. Against this background, those responsible for offering independent information advice and guidance to young people are likely to face a considerable dilemma in judging when and how far they can promote the Diploma as a suitable progression route.

Relationship between the Diploma and work-based provision for 16-19 year-olds: At the outset, there was talk of progress being made, over time, towards a measure of integration between apprenticeships and the Diploma, based on the use of Diploma components within apprenticeship frameworks and the obvious potential of work-based programmes to provide the necessary workplace experience required for the Diploma. However the limited take-up

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post-16 in the first two years has raised questions as to how far this will take effect. The relationship between work-based programmes and the Diploma could merely become limited to discussion of progression routes between the two programmes, whereas earlier thinking held out the promise of much more than this, particularly in terms of Level 3 provision.

Future development of the Diploma

This brief analysis suggests there is a strong risk that the Diploma will go the way of other failed attempts (GNVQs, VCEs, Applied A Levels, VGCSEs) to introduce new 'applied' qualifications within the existing qualifications framework. Take-up will not achieve expectations; failure rates will be relatively high; there could be a review, leading to some significant design changes intended to address 'teething' difficulties; and the qualification will struggle along, with at best only limited or lukewarm recognition and support from providers, students, parents, employers and HE, until a new government embarks on another initiative to tackle the perceived 'failure' of the system to provide a sufficiently broad based curriculum for 14-19 learners.

Despite the experiences of the last 30 years, this should not be seen as inevitable. However it will require a fresh approach and a different way of thinking to ensure that these past failures are not replicated. Seen as a process of curriculum development and reform, rather than simply a new qualification in an already crowded field, the Diploma has much to commend it. It can provide a challenging and rewarding learning experience for students demotivated by more traditional courses and teaching methods. It allows for a more broad-based programme than single qualifications, with the flexibility to combine different elements within a coherent package. Although the FS are proving problematic in terms of attainment levels, there is widespread support for the principle that all students should develop these



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skills as part of their learning. And the EPQ is proving popular in its own right, including with students not taking the Diploma, as a means of developing their independent learning skills.

The essential problems faced by the Diploma arise primarily from the difficulty of developing a new qualification in competition with existing qualifications which, notwithstanding their drawbacks and limitations, remain popular and well regarded – not least because they are widely recognised and understood, and have stood the test of time. Whilst there is widespread recognition that the existing system is not meeting the needs of significant numbers of young people, the most effective way of addressing these needs is arguably through an evolutionary programme of curriculum development rather than a misconceived attempt to promote a new qualification for which there is no clear demand.

Following the election we need an informed debate, involving all relevant stakeholders – policy makers, 14-19 providers, employers, awarding bodies, professional associations, local authorities, higher education and educational researchers – to attempt to reach a clear consensus on the range of provision that will best meet the needs of 14-19 learners and how we should progress from the current arrangements.

Invitation to comment

This document is intended to provide a basis for informed discussion. It has been drawn up by the 14 – 19 Alliance, a network of organisations and individuals who share an active interest and professional involvement in the provision of effective learning opportunities for all 14-19 year olds. Members include professional teacher and lecturer associations and unions, providers and their representative organisations, awarding and examining bodies, and research institutions. The activities and work of the Alliance are co-ordinated by the Institute



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of Education's [Centre for Post-14 Research and Innovation](#).

Whilst Alliance members fully support the decision to put out a discussion paper at this critical time on what we all see as an important issue, the views expressed should not necessarily all be taken as reflecting the position of individual member organisations. However the Alliance is keen to stimulate discussion of the issues raised and intends to publish comments on this website. Please address any comments to Martyn Waring at m.waring@ioe.ac.uk.

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