

14-19 Diplomas and Higher Education

► This article describes the involvement of higher education and business in the development of new vocational qualifications for 14-19 year-olds in England. It is intended that this 'co-production' will lead to a set of qualifications which have an 'applied' character and which support progression into both employment and higher education. National availability, strong brand promotion and the inclusion of functional and generic skills are intended to encourage continued participation in education/training. Relatively low participation in education/training post-16 is perceived as a particular problem in England. The Diploma complements new legislation that requires all 17 years-olds to remain in education or training by 2013 and all 18 year-olds by 2015. The article considers how the facility for progression from Diplomas to university affects the success of the reform and explores possible connections between Diplomas and previously introduced two year vocational degrees in English universities. The article ends with a brief review of how the Diploma reform addresses issues of social inclusion in higher education.

What are 14-19 Diplomas?

The Diploma qualification is the latest in a series of vocational qualifications which have been developed in England with a view to improving the status and effectiveness of vocational education. Introduced as a third path alongside work-based apprenticeships and traditional academic qualifications¹, Diplomas are a product of a broader socio-economic policy which has been described as the "educational gospel", the idea that increased participation in education is the means of achieving both greater economic productivity and increasing equality of opportunity (GRUBB/LAZERSON 2004). In other words, the 'cake' can be both made bigger and distributed more fairly.

14-19 Diplomas were originally proposed by an independent group of experts, commissioned by the Government. They recommended that a unitised qualification framework should replace existing qualifications and encompass all qualifications for all 14-19 year-olds (TOMLINSON 2004). However, divisions within the Labour Government and the approach of a general election contributed to the emergence of a less radical policy: instead Diplomas were introduced as an 'applied' qualification alongside the traditional academic qualifications (Department for Education and Skills 2005).

However, unlike current academic qualifications the Diploma is a 'school-leaver' or 'baccalaureate' qualification which incorporates a package of basic, generic and specialised skills and capabilities. Diplomas are at this time offered for 14 employment sectors and on three consecutive levels (see ill.). While Diplomas at all levels have a similar structure, they become progressively larger as the level increases. Moreover, they are designed to make it impossible for learners to opt out of learning capabilities which are regarded as essential for employment and living. Thus, diplomas contain three elements:



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¹ In England most 16 year-olds take some eight to ten separate subject examinations, known as General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSEs) while most 18 year-olds take three to four separate subject examinations, known as General Certificates of Education or A Levels and roughly equivalent to the German Abitur.

- *Principal learning* consists of the knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes that support progress into a particular employment sector, such as retail, engineering or hospitality (QCDA 2009). While the initial requirement for work experience is low, just two weeks, it is further required that 50 per cent of principal learning should be applied, which is to say that it should be taught and assessed in the context of real or realistic sector-related tasks or situations.² Thus, on all three Diploma levels principal learning has been planned to support learners who may choose to exit into apprenticeship or training after completing level 1 or level 2, or who may progress to level 3 to enter employment or university.
- *Generic skills* consist of practical mathematics, English and IT skills, so called ‘functional skills’, and employability or ‘personal, social, learning and thinking skills’.
- The *additional or specialist learning* provides choice: learners can either take further sector-related units, which could be specialised vocational or occupational qualifications or academic qualifications.³

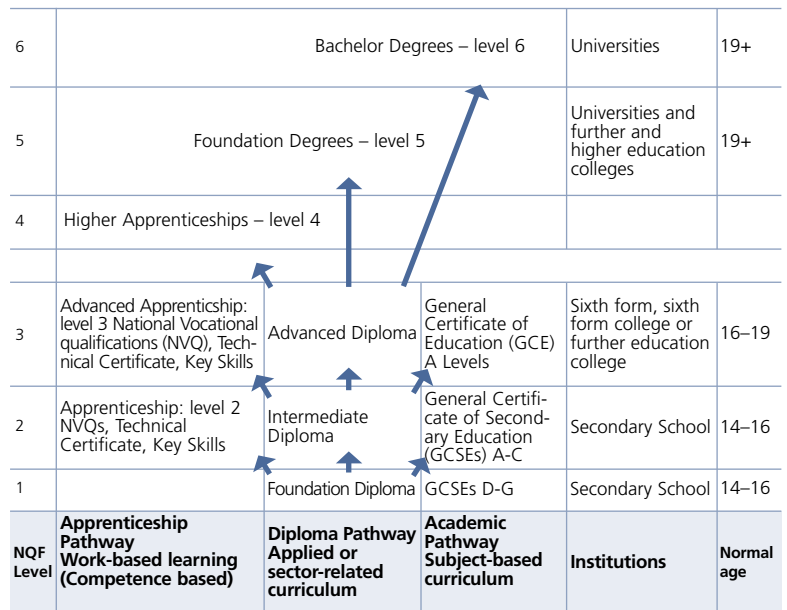
In the face of some criticism, the government has made it clear that, for the time being at least, the Diploma represents one of three 14-19 pathways: academic qualifications such as A Levels, Diplomas and work-based apprenticeships (see ill.). While it is therefore true that the Diploma is being offered alongside other pathways, it has features which make it seem something more than that. In the first place, the Diploma is a portfolio qualification which, for 18 year-olds, recognises *all* of their learning. Secondly, students can take A Levels or National Vocational Qualifications that form part of apprenticeships and include them as part of their additional and specialist learning within their Diplomas. Thirdly, the Diploma claims to combine theoretical and practical learning as ‘applied’ learning, which means that rather than being only one qualification alongside the others, it is positioned to bridge the divide – and to some extent blur the boundaries – between academic and vocational learning.

Furthermore, the government has said that it may decide, in the future, that Diplomas could provide a replacement for A Levels, for many if not for all students (DCSF 2007). In 2007 the government announced that there would be three further ‘academic’ Diplomas in Humanities and Social Sciences, Science and Modern Languages and International Communication. These Diplomas would likewise be concerned with the application of knowledge and skills. However, they would be defined by subject domains rather than employment sectors.

² Examples of applied learning in the form of written and video case studies can be viewed at: <http://www.qcda.gov.uk/25659.aspx>

³ For example, an Engineering Diploma could be ‘deepened’ by including a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ). Alternatively, the same Diploma could be ‘broadened’ by including an academic qualification such as a GCE A Level in physics.

Illustration Main 14-19 pathways in English education and training system 2010



Arrows show main possible progression routes up through Diploma levels and beyond

Official policy states that by 2013 all 14-19 learners in England will have an entitlement to choose to study any of the 17 Diplomas and that at that point the government will review the future of A Levels and Diplomas.

Designing for Progression

In England previous vocational qualifications are perceived to have failed because they lacked credibility with employers or/and with learners. It was therefore seen as essential that employers were involved in the design of the Diplomas and that employers should endorse Diplomas in order to confirm that they will carry currency in the labour market. However, from the point of view of many learners and employers, a qualification that can only lead directly to employment is of less value than one that can lead to degree level education. Many of the employers consulted were most concerned about recruiting at graduate level and they valued the Diploma because they believed that it could progress learners into degrees from which they could then enter their sectors. Equally, many learners would not opt for a Diploma if that decision took away their chance to go to university. It was therefore essential that Diplomas should support progression both to employment and work-based training and to university.

The attempt to create a process through which employers and universities with an interest in a particular Diploma, such as engineering or hospitality or science, could be identified and then engaged into the design process has been

one of the most innovative and difficult elements of the reform. The government set up dedicated Diploma Development Partnerships (DDPs). These DDPs were managed by the national bodies tasked to engage and represent employers in workforce development and skills planning, the Sector Skills Councils (SSCs). The DDPs were tasked to engage and consult with lecturers in higher education, school teachers, teachers in vocational colleges (colleges of further education), representatives from professional bodies, subject associations, teacher unions and etc. In the early stages, the DDPs did not find it easy to identify and engage representatives from higher education (ERTL et al. 2009). When they did engage universities they sometimes found that differences between what universities wanted and what employers wanted were difficult to reconcile. That said there is evidence that the Diploma development process helped to improve the dialogue between higher education and employers' representatives, at least in relation to some employment sectors, and that compromises were worked out – for example, the development of an enhanced mathematics unit within the Engineering Diploma – to support progression to university.

Diploma Delivery

Innovation in curriculum design has been supported by new ideas for delivery. Rather than leaving it up to particular schools and colleges, the government requires that groups of institutions should come together to offer a range of different Diplomas collectively. Such consortia include not only secondary schools but also colleges of further education (that is post-16 vocational colleges) and they can include private or third sector training companies as well. The intention is that vocational training specialists will bring their expertise and specialist resources to support the delivery of Diplomas. In addition, consortia are required to engage local employers to provide work placements and other work-related learning opportunities, such as visits, mentoring and business challenges, in order to support the applied character of Diplomas.

The involvement of vocational colleges and employers in the education of 14-16 year-olds is not new in England. However, the pervasiveness of the involvement implied by a national roll out of the Diplomas marks a significant increase in scale. Indeed, it might be argued that giving local consortia of schools, vocational colleges, training companies, employers and local government representatives the responsibility to provide 'credible' vocational qualifications is a step towards the locally based arrangements that characterise vocational provision in Germany or the Netherlands.

Delivery of the first five Diplomas to 11,326 learners (considerably less than the 40,000 originally planned) commenced in 2008; an additional 36,441 learners are repor-

ted to have started in 2009. New Diplomas are being introduced each year and more consortia are being given permission to offer Diplomas, once they have demonstrated that they are ready.⁴

Diplomas and Higher Education (HE)

As outlined above, the extent to which Diplomas will qualify young people to enter degree programmes has emerged as a critical success factor for Diplomas. Consultation suggested that teachers and learners would be discouraged from taking Diplomas if they did not permit entry to degree courses. A recent survey of how higher education institutions perceive Diplomas found that senior managers in most institutions planned to follow the University Common Admissions Service (UCAS) tariff in regarding an Advanced Diploma as equivalent in 'size' and 'status' to 3.5 A levels (RICHARDSON/HAYNES 2009a). However, admissions officers from the more prestigious 'research intensive' universities were also reported as saying that there was less support for Diplomas from academic staff at this early stage and that the reputation of the Diploma would depend upon the capability of students with Diplomas for undergraduate study. On the other hand, some elements of the Diploma, for example the Extended Project⁵, are relatively attractive to admissions tutors. They are believed to address independent thinking and writing skills – capabilities which were often judged to be lacking in some A Level students (RICHARDSON/HAYNES 2009b; STANLEY 2009).

It seems probable that many Advanced Diploma students are likely to progress onto full bachelor's (honours) degrees in related vocational subjects, for the most part at non-elite 'teaching intensive' universities. However, it will be possible for students to use Diplomas to progress to elite universities and students will not always be confined to taking vocational degrees that correspond to their Diplomas. For example, the University of Cambridge has signalled that an Advanced Diploma in Engineering could qualify a student to study engineering (so long as he/she achieves a physics A Level as the additional or specialist learning component). University College London is demanding an Advanced Diploma plus an additional A Level for admission.

It is also likely that some Diploma students will progress onto the lower status, two year Foundation Degree (see information box) or another level 4 or 5 qualification rather than a level 6 bachelor's degree. This may prove to be an appropriate option for learners who fail to complete all parts of an Advanced Diploma, for example, the additional or specialist learning component. The particular progression route taken will depend upon the learner's grades, the qualifica-

⁴ Consortia that wish to deliver Diplomas are required to make a detailed submission reviewed by local and then national panels.

tions they achieve in addition to their Diploma and the balance of demand and supply in relation to particular subjects and HE institutions. For some youngsters, Diplomas will offer an alternative to Foundation Degrees, because they will give them access to bachelor's degrees. For others Diplomas may be a pathway into Foundation Degrees. Diplomas will work in different ways for different young people, depending on their achievement, aspiration and the kinds of support and advice they receive.

Foundation Degrees

The Foundation Degree (FD) is a two year vocational degree at level 4/5, characterised by significant amounts of work-based and work-related learning. Introduced in 2001, it forms part of the government's strategy to increase participation of non-traditional students in higher education. Regarded from the point of view of employers it addresses a deficiency in intermediate skills or associate professional staff. Seen from the point of view of advancing social inclusion, it provides a progression route into higher education for those who have followed a vocational programme at school or in a further education college or those who are in employment.

Foundation Degrees have grown sharply: by 2007-08 there were 72,000 students on over 2,500 programmes covering virtually all employment sectors. Numbers are planned to rise to 100,000 by 2010 (about five per cent of total undergraduates) (REEVE et al. 2007).

Will Diplomas Support Inclusion?

Universities in England have been challenged by government to become more responsive to economic needs and to become more socially inclusive (DEARING 1997, Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2009; LEITCH 2006). While participation in higher education has grown in England, growth has not matched international trends. The low attainment of young people from social classes one to three is the single most important cause of the difference in HE participation between the top three social classes (48%) and the bottom three (18%) (Department for Children Schools and Families 2003). A Levels appear to be a particular barrier: only 19 per cent of those from manual backgrounds gain two A Levels by age 19 compared to 43 per cent from non-manual backgrounds. 90 per cent students who achieve two A Levels progress to university as against only 50 per cent students who obtain level 3 vocational qualifications. The 14-19 Diplomas have been designed to offer an alternative to A Levels – with an experiential learning style and vocational contexts – but still to equip learners with the capability for degree level study. Universities are disposed to believe that the Diploma can deliver, particularly since the government has tied additional funding through increases in tuition fees to the capacity of universities to show that they are working to widen social participation.

5 All Diploma students are required to design, deliver and evaluate a project on a topic from the domain of their particular Diploma.

Conclusion

One year after the introduction of Diplomas it is too early to see whether they will deliver what they promise. However, we can detect a convergence of strategy in the reform of vocational 14-19 and vocational higher education. There is some evidence that business and higher education can work together to design and endorse qualifications and programmes which are attractive to learners (full time and part-time) and which offer worthwhile outcomes. On the other hand, there are a number of threats to the success of the Diplomas: student demand has been lower than anticipated, the recession is squeezing post-16 educational expenditure, particularly higher education, and the oncoming general election may lead to policy change. ■

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