

CAMPAIGN FOR LEARNING POLICY BRIEFING NOTE

DIPLOMAS: VOCATIONAL REVOLUTION OR GNVQS MARK II?

28 February 2008, 2pm - 4pm, Campaign for Learning, London, WC1N 6EF

The Campaign for Learning's policy briefings respond quickly to the publication of key papers and leading policy issues and offer essential information and analysis to inform the whole work of policy makers. This Paper summarises a recent seminar hosted by the Campaign looking at the development of 14-19 Diplomas and specifically whether they constituted 'a vocational revolution or a re-run of GNVQs'. The seminar consisted of three brief presentations and roundtable discussion.

INTRODUCTION

First sketched out in a White Paper in February 2005 as a response to the Tomlinson Working Group Report on 14 - 19 Reform, 14 - 19 Diplomas seem to have endured a fairly tortuous development. Lauded initially as central to "*a very high quality route, which mixes academic and vocational study as appropriate, leading to academic and vocational study as appropriate, leading to qualifications valued by employers and universities and therefore an attractive choice for young people,*" (White Paper para 6.6), they have at times struggled with the weight of expectation constantly being heaped on them.

Initially seen as an alternative track for those young people who sought, or at least needed, a more applied form of learning, let alone as a route to support the mass expansion of entry into higher education, they have gradually moved more centrally to a position where the Government seems to be lining them as the long - term qualification of choice for all young people (Ed Balls Oct 2007.) In effect, the Government has given itself five years, up to a review of 14 - 19 qualifications in 2013, to assess whether a universal framework of Diplomas should be fully adopted and whether existing qualifications, including A' levels, should be thence be incorporated within it.

All this before the first Diplomas have even started and while feverish work goes on both nationally and locally to build a system to support the development of Diplomas.

Since Ed Balls became Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, Diploma development has moved on apace. First we had the announcement last October of three new 'general' Diploma lines, then confirmation in December of pilot year funding arrangements and of UCAS and 'league' table equivalencies for Diplomas and more recently the announcement of a new form of Diploma - the Extended Diploma. Yet a sense of unease still persists; are we clear what Diplomas are; are employers really engaged; will universities accept them; have we got the resources and systems for extensive collaborative provision; will 'kids' be interested?

These and many other similar questions have surfaced over recent months in Reports such as those from the National Audit Office, the Nuffield Review, the 1994 Group of Universities and the HMC. A key question for many is whether Diplomas really do herald, at last, a genuine transformation of the applied learning provision for young people in this country or whether this is a re - run of many other previous worthy attempts to do something similar.

This was the question facing participants at the latest Campaign for Learning seminar.

This Paper summarises the three presentations made at the event and captures within it some of the discussion points raised.

PRESENTATION 1

DEIAN HOPKIN, VICE - CHANCELLOR, LONDON SOUTH BANK UNIVERSITY AND A DIPLOMA CHAMPION

Professor Hopkin argued that Diplomas, let alone 14 - 19 reforms, are part of a much bigger landscape that spread across issues such as widening participation, social mobility and even global competitiveness. In many ways, some of the difficulties associated with Diplomas come about because of the complexity of this bigger picture.

Diplomas therefore should be seen in context as changing the paradigm of 14 - 19 learning, they therefore carry enormous expectations with them.

Professor Hopkin cited four challenges in particular.

First, employer engagement, recognised as 'weakly developed' in many areas by the National Audit Report in December, but central to the success of Diplomas. Employers have three critical roles; providing informed input as the Diplomas take shape, supporting learning where possible and sending out the right signals about the value of Diploma learners at the end. Second, individual advice and guidance, a perennial issue but one that assumes greater importance in the early stages of Diplomas where informed choices are needed. Third, logistics, and the whole issue about how to open up learning so that students could move around different sites and access specialist provision. This is proving quite challenging in some areas which is why, fourthly, additional funding is currently being put in to support collaborative provision.

In the discussion that followed a number of issues were raised including the relationship with Apprenticeships, the role of FE and Academies, the 'corrosive' effect of league tables and the poor levels of understanding about Diplomas generally.

PRESENTATION 2

GEOFF STANTON, INDEPENDENT CONSULTANT

Geoff recognised that while an enormous amount of work was going on to make Diplomas work, a number of fundamental issues remained. He considered four in particular.

First, the historical context where despite the wide range of initiatives in this area over the last decade or more, there has been no overall increase in 16 - 19 participation since 1994. Part of the reason for this is that too many developments have been initiative or qualification led rather than curriculum led and interestingly in many cases, have had to be revised within a few years in each case. History really can teach us a lesson or two in this area.

Second, the question of just where Diplomas sit within the 14 - 19 landscape, an important issue when so much emphasis is being placed currently on the qualification framework. The official view seems to be that Diplomas occupy the middle pathway between traditional academic qualifications on the one hand and work - based qualifications such as apprenticeships on the other. That may be so but the trouble is that this simple overview seemingly ignores a whole host of other qualifications, including notably BTECS which have seen enormous growth recently, which are already, by all accounts, serving learners pretty well. Given that most young people who achieve the standard five good GCSEs stay on and have a reasonable choice of options are we missing a trick here - shouldn't we be targeting those who do not typically stay on and who may not have much choice of what's on offer?

Third, and a message perhaps from the days of GNVQ and other similar initiatives, will these Diplomas be genuinely practical in nature or will they end up being watered down versions of

traditional academic qualifications? Geoff examined the learning content at Level 2 between two Diploma lines and alternative BTEC qualifications. Laying one alongside the other, it certainly seemed that, in these cases at least, the Diploma concentrated more on understanding the industry and how it operated while the BTEC focused more on the acquisition of particular skills.

Fourth, have we got the development process right for Diplomas or is it within this that some of the qualification 'wrinkles' occur. A particular problem seems to be the assessment regime; as soon as this is locked in to meet the needs of regulatory requirements and public confidence about standards, the nature of the learning in particular and Diploma in general changes. At the moment, the Diploma development process is linear whereas what is really needed is a cyclical process which starts and ends with what works for the learner.

In conclusion, Geoff argued that practitioners should have a greater say over Diploma design, that the work - based route should be 'protected' as such and that there should be more openness about learning the lessons from the past.

PRESENTATION 3

STEVE BESLEY, HEAD OF POLICY, EDEXCEL

Steve also noted the enormous buzz of activity going on around 14 - 19 developments and argued that three themes stood out from this.

First, that Diplomas were part of an extensive reform programme, one initially set out in the final chapter of the 2005 14 - 19 Implementation Plan. Part of this extensive build was concerned with structures, part with learning culture and part with the curriculum itself but overall it was subject to competing demands and rising priorities. The competing demands were between choice and collaboration, an employer driven curriculum and a parental driven one and between academic 'rigour' and functionality. As for rising priorities, these included the emphasis on functional skills, on Apprenticeships, on disengaged young people and on advice and guidance. On top of all this, some new components had been added to the reform programme as it went along including notably a new Key Stage 3 platform, a drive towards personalisation and a recognition through Leitch of the skills needs of the future.

Second, that the curriculum framework around Diplomas was not static but evolutionary. In simple terms it had shifted from the unified framework model of Tomlinson, through to the separate tracks of the Kelly White paper, back to the broader framework model now being espoused by Ed Balls. Central to this was the clear growth of a different form of qualification, less subject based, more composite in nature such as the Foundation Learning Tier or the standard Apprenticeship. Arguably a range of pathways was emerging; academic, specialist, general, vocational, work - based, but fitting this together was not easy.

Third, the need to create a long - term system particularly to support the eventual compulsory participation of all 14 - 19 year olds within the next 5 - 7 years. The two current drivers for this system were the 10 year Children's Plan and the Education Bills of 2006 and 2008, the former in that it set out the formal entitlement for 14 - 19 learning, the latter because it is setting out the participation mechanisms.

In conclusion, Steve identified six measures of success for the wider 14 - 19 programme. Can it: raise levels of functional skills; establish a clear position in the qualification framework; engage learners; secure stakeholder buy in; ensure workforce support; become the central driver of a new local collaborative system of learning for young people?