
National evaluation of Diplomas: cohort 2 – the second year

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Background

The Department for Education (DfE) commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) and the University of Exeter to conduct a national evaluation of the implementation and impact of Diplomas. The two main aims of the evaluation were to: review the **implementation and delivery** of the Diplomas and to assess the **impact** of the Diplomas on young people.

The Diploma qualifications are offered at three levels (Level 1 (Foundation), Level 2 (Higher) and Level 3 (Progression and Advanced)) across 14 subjects, and have been implemented in three phases in 2008, 2009, and 2010. The Diploma is often delivered through consortia of schools, colleges, training providers and higher education institutions (HEIs), although the requirement to deliver via consortia was lifted in 2010.

The Diploma consists of three main components:

- sector-specific principal learning
- generic learning (including functional skills in English, mathematics and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), the development of personal, learning and thinking skills (PLTS), and a project or extended project)
- additional/specialist learning (ASL).

Diplomas also include ten days of work experience including learning in the workplace and learning through realistic work environments to enable the development of practical skills and work-related application of learning.

Following the election of the coalition government in 2010, a number of changes to the implementation and delivery of the Diploma qualification were introduced. Updates on these reforms can be found at:

<http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/qualifications/diploma/>

Methodology

This summary reports on findings from the second year of Diploma delivery for the second cohort of learners. These learners started a Diploma in September 2009 on one of the first ten Diploma subjects. This summary reports on data collated during spring 2011 from:

- surveys of 606 Diploma learners in Year 11 and 97 Diploma learners in Year 13, and 1111 comparison learners in Year 11 and 155 comparison learners in Year 13.
- case-study visits to six consortia which involved interviews with consortium leads (5), Diploma subject leads (12), staff responsible for Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG; 7), senior institution managers (14; in pre-16 and post-16 institutions), Diploma teachers (14), and Year 11 learners (53) who had embarked on the Diploma.

It should be noted that the qualitative findings from interviews across these six case-study consortia provide illustration of views only and should not be generalised as numbers of consortia and interviewees are small.

Key Findings

- Staff in three consortia reported that the Diploma gave young people a broad insight into different aspects of an industry sector, which was considered helpful for them when making decisions about future pathways, and for offering the opportunity to experience varied learning environments and learning in a different style. Staff and learners reported other benefits which included the development of independent learning skills, communication skills, team-working skills, and enhanced research and evaluation skills.
- Learners appeared generally satisfied with their Diploma course. However, there was some evidence to suggest that it had not always met expectations, for example, the lower than expected amount of practical activities and the higher than expected level of challenge of the functional skills examinations. The latter was emphasised because it is a requirement to pass it to achieve the full Diploma.
- The evidence has shown that most Diploma learners planned to stay in education. A minority planned to undertake a work-based learning route. It was evident that, in most cases, learners felt that the Diploma had helped them to make a decision about what to do next. Just under half of learners studying a Diploma in Year 13 had applied to university or HEI, and encouragingly, most had received an offer of a place on the course.
- Teachers reported that they had enjoyed delivering the qualification. Moreover, they said that in order to deliver the Diploma they had extended their teaching approaches through utilising a greater amount of application to real-world contexts, using a more facilitating approach to teaching and, for vocational teachers, undertaking more theory-based teaching.
- Teachers' confidence with assessment had increased since the first year of delivery, in particular in terms of controlled assessment. However, some teachers needed a better understanding of external moderation, and in particular, understanding of why assessments marks had been reduced when moderated by external assessors.
- The evaluation found that the IAG provided to learners could be improved to ensure that they understand the programme and are equipped to make an informed decision about their choices. There was evidence that staff knowledge of the Diploma and their ability to provide information to learners was inadequate. There was a lack of consistency across institutions with regard to IAG.

- Staff considered that the Diploma qualification was too big in terms of content and guided learning hours, and too complex due to the number of components. Additionally, it was perceived by some staff to be too demanding and restrictive for some learners.

Which component parts of the Diploma are key?

The evidence revealed that the principal learning component was considered most useful (although some felt it would benefit from simplification). Staff interviewed perceived that this component was valued by learners for its scope and coverage of a broad range of topics relevant to the sector. However, learners interviewed had expected the course to involve more practical activities. In three case-study areas, consortium leads said that the specialist learning element of the ASL component was beneficial as it provided learners with opportunities to take part in more practical work. Therefore, if the ASL (particularly specialist learning) is removed from the Diploma, the opportunity to provide an underpinning practical element and personalisation will also be removed.

Concerns were expressed regarding the difficulty of functional skills, in particular the mathematics and ICT examinations. The removal of functional skills from the Diploma was widely suggested partly to ensure that passing them was not a pre-requisite for attaining the full Diploma. However, these skills were also recognised as important for all young people to acquire.

Overall, the Diploma was generally regarded by staff interviewed as too big, complex and demanding in its current format and its future would be enhanced by streamlining.

In terms of the experience of Diplomas, what has been learnt about effective teaching and learning?

Diploma learners (survey respondents and case-study interviewees) were largely satisfied with their Diploma courses and felt they were progressing well. They enjoyed the rich and varied learning environments, the different approach to teaching and learning inherent in Diplomas and the focus on their chosen sector. Teachers reported enjoying the facilitative approach to enabling young people to become independent learners (skills needed for further and higher education) and building links with employers. They also highlighted that, although intensive in nature, the longer Diploma teaching sessions (and the smaller numbers of students in each class) enabled them to '*get to know*' students better – this also contributed to enabling young people to learn effectively.

Teachers observed that they, and learners, benefitted from the applied nature of Diplomas. Although challenging, teachers reported the benefits of broadening and deepening their theoretical knowledge of the wide-ranging Diploma industry sectors. The collaborative approach to delivery was felt to have contributed to this expansion of knowledge as many teachers exchanged ideas and knowledge with colleagues at other institutions. Having the capacity to strengthen the theory with practical application (although this was not always happening) was perceived to be important to effectively teaching the Diploma. Teachers reported that linking the component parts of the Diploma to make it a cohesive qualification was a major challenge.

In what way have Diploma learners benefitted from taking a Diploma?

Teachers and young people concurred that the Diploma had enhanced learners' communication, team-working and independent learning skills. Furthermore, teachers observed that Diplomas had enabled learners to take more responsibility for their own learning and to have enhanced their ability to use their own initiative.

The evidence indicates that most Diploma learners have gained from an alternative and diverse way of learning and have clearly been satisfied by the course, have enjoyed it, have remained engaged in education and (as discussed below) intend to remain in education or training after their Diploma experience.

Overall, the majority of Diploma learners across both year groups were satisfied with their course, although levels of satisfaction dropped in the second year. Reasons cited amongst the Year 11 learners interviewed included the amount of coursework, the pressure of deadlines and a reduction in involvement with employers and the world of work in the second year.

What progress have Diploma learners made?

Most Year 11 and 13 Diploma learners felt they were progressing well on their Diploma course and were planning to continue in education or undertake work-based learning opportunities. Aspects of the course that were more frequently cited amongst Year 11 learners as having helped in decision-making were activities carried out with an employer/someone from the world of work, the principal learning units and the Diploma project. In terms of progress post-18, a greater proportion of non-Diploma respondents in Year 13 intended to progress onto a course at a university/HEI compared with their Diploma peers.

As mentioned above, the functional skills component of the qualification was cited amongst the majority of consortium management staff as a factor that could impact adversely on learners' ability to progress.

A key consideration in Diploma learners' progress is ensuring that appropriate learners are enrolled on the Diploma qualification. It will be necessary to build up awareness of this new qualification amongst adults advising young people. Young people would benefit from more consistent IAG across institutions, as illustrated by the fact that Year 11 Diploma learners reported receiving less IAG than their non-Diploma peers about future opportunities.

The inconsistency in coverage and quality of IAG received by young people is of particular concern when schools take over the responsibility for deciding their IAG priorities from local authorities in September 2012 (and in the interim there is minimal IAG provision from Connexions).

What has been learnt about the effective management of consortia and collaboration?

The key success factors to the effectiveness of consortium management were considered to be good communication across the consortium, effective consortium leadership and planning and time to carry out these tasks.

Staff reported that collaboration works best when it is allowed to evolve over time and where there is a simple model of operation, trust and effective communication between institutions, an established protocol agreed at the outset and protected funding. Benefits of collaboration included: enhanced relationship with other educational institutions and employers, increased staff development opportunities, and the opportunity to offer learners a qualification with a different approach. Disadvantages were linked to the complexity of the delivery models, including logistical issues, the number of institutions involved and aligning protocols such as monitoring of teaching and learning, assessment and exam registration.

What is the future of the Diploma?

The majority of consortium managers said that they would not offer the Diploma in its present form in the immediate future. Although the Diploma was recognised to confer benefits on both learners and practitioners, the evidence suggests that the original aim of the qualification was perhaps too broad, and points to a need for streamlining. Consortium managers also felt that recent changes to Diploma policy¹ would reduce Diploma delivery in the future.

There was a decrease in interest in take-up of the Diploma, either due to a decrease in demand from learners or due to the reduced number of Diploma courses offered by consortia. Consortium leads believed this decrease in interest was because of: widespread uncertainty surrounding the future of the Diploma, cuts in Diploma funding, the Wolf Review (Wolf, 2011) recommendations on curriculum time for vocational qualifications at Key Stage 4, decreased support at consortium level, the perceived difficulty of achieving the Diploma, the complexity of assessment, and the perception that the Diplomas were too theory-based.

Recommendations

- The principal learning component should be maintained if changes to the structure of the Diploma are made, although streamlined by doing any or all of the following three options: reducing the number of guided learning hours per unit, amalgamating units in order to reduce overlap, and/or removing some units altogether.
- Staff and learners valued the project and work experience/employer involvement, feeling these should be maintained because of their applied nature of learning and the application of theory to real-world contexts.
- Although considered important in terms of generic, transferable skills, for all young people to acquire, PLTS and functional skills were the least valued components within the Diploma

¹ <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/qualifications/diploma/>

qualification. ASL was also not fully understood by either staff or learners. The future of these components should be considered and clarified.

- There was further scope to improve assessment by ensuring that training was timely. Teachers' practice would be enhanced by better understanding of how Awarding Bodies externally moderate. This would better equip them to provide effective feedback to learners so they could more fully understand marking criteria and improve their work.
- The evaluation found that there is a lack of consistency across institutions with regard to IAG which means that some young people are being given partial and incomplete information. This has meant that for some young people the Diploma has not met their expectations for example in terms of the amount of practical work. This suggests that offering training and support to *all* staff is key to ensure they have the necessary knowledge to assist learners in making decisions.
- The benefits of collaboration were recognised, with young people clearly indicating the value of learning in different types of institutions.

Additional Information

The full report can be accessed at <http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/>
Further information about this research can be obtained from
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This research report was commissioned before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.