
National Evaluation of Diplomas: Cohort 2 – the first year of delivery

Tami McCrone, Pauline Wade, Gill Featherstone, Clare Southcott and Sarah Golden (National Foundation for Educational Research) and Gill Haynes (University of Exeter)

Background

The introduction of Diplomas for 14-19 year olds represented a major innovation in educational opportunity for young people in England. Following the establishment of the Coalition government in May 2010, a number of changes to the implementation and delivery of the Diploma qualification were introduced. The Minister of State for Schools announced¹ that development of new Diplomas in science, humanities and languages, which were due to be introduced from September 2011, would be discontinued. Additionally the Diploma entitlement, whereby all young people within an area would be able to access any of the Diploma subjects, would be removed and that the decision about which Diploma subjects would be available to students would in future be made by schools and colleges. Moreover, it was decided that the Gateway application process whereby consortia (of schools, colleges, training providers, employers and Higher Education Institutes (HEIs)) had previously submitted an application to the Department for Education (DfE) for each Diploma subject they wanted to offer would no longer be required for provision commencing from 2012. Other changes included the freedom for institutions to decide whether or not they wanted to work collaboratively to provide Diploma provision. Updates on the Diploma reform can be found at: <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/qualifications/diploma/a0064056/diploma-announcements>

This summary reports the findings of research as carried out in the spring 2010, which explored experiences of the first year of delivery of the second cohort of Diploma learners (who started their Diploma in September 2009). It presents the findings from surveys of pre- and post-16 Diploma learners (n=730 and n=224 respectively) and comparison learners (n=1397 and n=338 respectively). In addition, case-study visits to 15 consortia took place, consisting of in-depth interviews with Diploma learners in Years 10 and 12, and key stakeholders including consortium leads, Diploma subject leads and teachers, and senior managers.

Key Findings

- Overall, the majority of students were satisfied with their Diploma course and felt that they had made the right decision to take a Diploma. There was evidence that Year 10 learners who were more satisfied with prior Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG), and those who had some employer involvement in their Diploma learning, were more satisfied with the Diploma.
- Diploma learners were intending to progress to either further or higher education or a work-based route, in particular Apprenticeships. Young people believed that the Diploma

¹ Update from DfE on Diplomas and other qualifications relevant to 14-19 year olds: July 2010

had not constrained their choices and they indicated that they were considering a variety of options for the future.

- Cohort 2 learners indicated that they selected the Diploma principally because it related to a career they were interested in. The value of high-quality IAG (which details the content and the style of learning required to study a Diploma) is reflected in the evidence of a link between satisfaction with prior IAG and subsequent satisfaction with the Diploma course.
- The Diploma subjects introduced in 2008 were more likely to be associated with learner satisfaction with the Diploma than the subjects from Phase 2.
- The most prevalent models of Diploma delivery were those involving a school and college and an in-house model where all Diploma learning was provided only to an institution's own students. Where collaborative ways of working existed, they worked best when built on pre-existing relationships and were given time to develop.
- Staff teaching the Diplomas were enjoying the experience although they expressed uncertainty about future plans for the Diplomas. They could see the benefit that young people were deriving from it, they liked the involvement of the world of work and partnership working with colleagues, and facilitating applied and independent learning.
- Looking forward, interviewees stressed the importance of future IAG, the value of good working partnerships, the significance of effective planning and the need for simplification and clarification of the Diploma component parts, in particular in terms of functional skills.

Were Diploma learners satisfied with their course?

Overall, the majority of learners were satisfied with, and were enjoying, their Diploma course. Students were finding that the Diploma was a challenging experience that was teaching them a range of new and useful skills and, they believed, was preparing them well for the work place. The evidence indicated that learners appreciated the opportunity to develop independent working skills and that this was facilitated by both the design and structure of the course. Employer engagement was an important factor and contributed significantly to learner satisfaction. There was evidence that Year 10 learners who were more satisfied with prior IAG, and those who had some employer involvement in their Diploma learning, were more satisfied with the Diploma.

Dissatisfaction was linked to the perceived heavy workload (although staff and learners felt that if students were fully engaged in the course they could cope with the workload). Also the course was not always viewed as expected by young people. This highlights the importance of accurate IAG to help young people to fully understand the content of the Diploma and the required learning style.

What were Diploma students planning to do in the future?

The evidence shows that learners who had selected to take a Diploma were at this stage, in the first year of their course, intending to remain in learning after completing their Diploma either in further education (in a college or sixth form) or in higher education. Furthermore, according to young people the Diploma had not constrained their choices as they were also considering the work-based route, in particular Apprenticeships, and were more likely to do so than their peers who had not taken Diplomas. This indicates that young people who choose to take Diplomas are interested in engaging in the world of work and undertaking learning at work which may be one of their reasons for choosing a Diploma.

What were the key factors that informed student choice?

Cohort 2 learners indicated that they selected the Diploma principally because it related to a career they were interested in. It is also evident from the survey of learners who did not choose to take a Diploma that lack of interest in the subjects, and a preference for other qualifications were the main reasons for not choosing a Diploma.

There is some scope for improvement in terms of raising awareness of the qualification at institution level to ensure that all staff, regardless of whether or not they are delivering the qualification, have sufficient knowledge and understanding in order to advise learners where required.

Moreover, while learners reported having received a range of information about the Diploma, there was evidence which indicated that they would have welcomed more detailed information about the course (a finding also reported by cohort 1 learners). This should be a key consideration in order to ensure that there is a good level of understanding about the content of the course amongst all learners in order to make an informed decision.

How was teaching and learning progressing?

Teachers were largely positive about their experience of teaching Diplomas. While they had not needed to adapt their teaching style significantly, teaching the Diploma had entailed adopting a more applied learning approach. Research findings indicated that ensuring that the learning experience was sufficiently applied, and that learners engaged equally with the applied and more theoretical elements, was one of the challenges for teachers.

Teaching the Diploma was also different because it entailed making more links between their teaching and world of work. This was achieved through involving employers in a range of ways, by using real working environments (RWEs) and integrating reference to the real world into their teaching in the classroom. In addition, teachers were facilitating learners' independent learning and acting more as a guide in doing so (reflecting the views of teachers who taught the first cohort of Diploma learners). While teaching the Diploma had required more planning and preparation than was usually the case, it had also entailed more sharing of teaching with other teachers in some cases and there was evidence that teachers were embracing working with colleagues more closely.

The assessment of Diplomas continued to be one of the more challenging aspects for teachers. Nevertheless, there was evidence that subject leads, and to a slightly lesser extent teachers, were growing in confidence as they became more familiar with the process and gained feedback from Awarding Bodies which gave them guidance and reassurance. Nevertheless, teachers would like more support and guidance from awarding bodies, subject leads and domain assessors. Furthermore, they need time to develop their Diploma teaching, to work on building employer contacts and to more fully engage with assessment and partnership working.

In-house quality assurance procedures were used to monitor Diploma delivery. Monitoring of teaching and learning has to be handled sensitively. Inter-institutional lesson observations in particular were challenging and consortia were progressing with establishing the necessary agreements and procedures in order to overcome these challenges.

How is consortium management progressing?

Commitment to collaborative delivery across cohort 2 consortia was not considered to have improved much from baseline level and it was widely acknowledged that collaboration only worked well when it developed organically, rather than being imposed. This finding was consistent with cohort 1 where partnership working was reported to have faced challenges in most consortia. The most prevalent models of delivery were those involving a school and

college and an in-house model where all Diploma learning was provided only to an institution's own students. This finding reflects the policy development that institutions no longer need to collaborate to deliver the Diploma.

The evidence from this research suggests that, in view of the removal of the need to collaborate, together with the removal of funding for partnership working, institutions and consortia will work together where there is a recognised need to do so and the value is perceived to outweigh the challenges. This will, however, potentially reduce the range of choice of Diplomas available to learners in a local area. The extent of future collaboration will be explored in the next stage of this evaluation.

Which of the key components of the Diploma were particularly valued?

The Diploma qualification, with its different components, is generally regarded as complex by staff and learners, and there is evidence that a more stream-lined Diploma would be more popular. This would not only ease its delivery but would also make it easier to explain to young people and their parents.

There was evidence of more widespread specialist learning on offer than was the case for the first cohort of learners. Only one consortium was offering ASL on a fully-integrated consortium-wide basis and this was also the only one where there was a view that there was progress towards personalised learning through ASL.

Most work placements were organised at institutional level and generally good links with employers were reported. The widespread use of employers to support Diploma learning, indicates that employers have been effectively engaged and are willing to support Diplomas, even in the context of a challenging economic environment.

The Diploma offers students greater opportunities for work-related learning and (as reported above) there was evidence of a link between having taken part in a work placement and subsequent satisfaction with the Diploma course. Students appear to have particularly enjoyed the employer involvement and it is clear that a strength of the qualification, for both staff and students, is the emphasis placed on applied learning.

As was reported by cohort 1 interviewees, the functional skills component of the Diploma was widely perceived as contributing challenges rather than benefits, in particular the concern that students might not achieve the full Level 2 or 3 Diploma because they might not pass functional skills tests at the required level. Staff and students indicated that they would welcome the removal of functional skills from the Diploma so that full achievement of the Diploma was not dependent on passing functional skills.

What lessons have been learnt?

Although interviewees' comments were made in the context of the general election and related uncertainty, staff in most consortia were making plans for the future of Diplomas. They considered that it was likely that demand for some Diploma subjects at different levels would be stronger than for others, and in view of the removal of entitlement for all Diploma subjects for all young people it is now likely that demand for the most popular subjects will increase, while demand for less popular subjects will decrease further.

Looking forward, interviewees stressed the importance of future IAG, the value of good working partnerships, the significance of effective planning and the simplification and clarification of the Diploma component parts, in particular the functional skills component. The key benefits of Diplomas were said to be the offer of an engaging alternative to young people, partnership working, networking and the sharing of ideas, and the range of topics, knowledge and skills involved in teaching the Diploma. The main disadvantages of Diplomas were perceived to be

the time involved in administering and delivering a complex qualification and funding perceived to be inadequate to sustain delivery.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

- As three-quarters of young people not taking a Diploma said that they did not know much about them, there still appears to be scope to raise awareness of Diplomas more widely. Recent reforms have made it clear that the component qualifications of a Diploma may be delivered on an individual basis to support progression.
- There is also capacity for improvement in terms of raising awareness of the Diploma at institution level to ensure that all staff have sufficient knowledge and understanding in order to advise learners where required.
- Teachers would like more guidance and direction (in terms of, for example, appropriate training on assessment from awarding bodies, strategies for delivering the functional skills component and time for networking opportunities to more fully share information with colleagues) from consortium and subject leads and domain assessors. It is important to ensure that experience is shared and support is provided by awarding bodies to facilitate this.
- It is advisable that it is made clear to learners embarking on a Diploma that they not only have an interest in the subject, but also understand the style of learning (for example, the mix of theoretical, academic and applied learning and the need to be able to work independently) inherent in the qualification.
- To ensure that IAG is accurate and effective, the involvement of current Diploma learners in events should be considered so that they can share their experiences and answer queries amongst potential students.
- The work-placement component of the Diploma is viewed positively at all levels and there would be benefit in consortia with particularly effective practices in employer engagement sharing these widely.
- In general, the functional skills component has presented the most challenges in Diploma delivery and its uncoupling from the Diploma would be widely welcomed.
- The majority of young people taking a Diploma at Level 3 were intending to progress to higher education. However, one of the reasons given by young people who were not taking a Diploma for not doing so was because they wanted to continue to higher education. There would, therefore, be value in continuing to communicate to learners in Year 11 that the Diploma is one of a range of qualifications that are accepted by HEIs for entry onto degree courses so that they make informed decisions.

Additional Information

The full report can be accessed at <http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/>
Further information about this research can be obtained from Nicola Mackenzie,
Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London, SW1P 3BT.
Nicola.MACKENZIE@education.gsi.gov.uk

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 DFE.