
Evaluation of the implementation and impact of diplomas: findings from the 2009/10 survey of higher education institutions

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Background

This is the second in a series of surveys investigating higher education institutions' (HEIs) views and experiences of the Diplomas, first introduced in schools in September 2008. Fourteen sector-related Diplomas were introduced in three phases: in 2008 (5), in 2009 (5) and in 2010 (4). In the first survey (Richardson and Haynes 2009), a stratified, purposive sample of 19 English HEIs, educating 17 per cent of the country's undergraduates, was undertaken. Respondents were primarily key senior managers in each institution: Pro Vice-Chancellors (PVCs) and Heads of Admissions (HoAs). Data from these responses were supplemented with that from a sample of 62 admissions tutors spread across 17 of the 19 institutions.

In this second survey, a further 19 institutions were sampled, educating 16 per cent of the UK-based undergraduates attending English HEIs in 2008/09. Telephone interviews were again undertaken with PVCs and HoAs. In addition, using the UCAS website, the entry requirements specified by the 19 institutions were investigated for a range of 271 separate undergraduate courses which appeared to provide potential pathways from the first five Diploma subject areas.

Key findings

- In common with senior managers in the 2008 survey, PVCs in 2009/10 welcomed the breadth of learning inherent in Diplomas and their potential to widen participation. Also as in 2008, the range of learning styles fostered by Diplomas was considered well aligned to current developments in teaching and learning on undergraduate (UG) programmes.
- Involvement in Diploma **development** was at a higher level amongst the institutions sampled in this 2009/10 survey than in the 2008 sample. Although none of the institutions in this sample was currently involved with **delivery**, there was a willingness amongst some, mostly teaching-led, HEIs to collaborate with schools and colleges in delivery, if additional resources were made available to HEIs for this.
- All institutions in this sample had departments accepting one or more of the first five subject areas for entry onto undergraduate degree courses. Most senior managers were of the view that Diploma applicants could either stay within the pathway related to their chosen subject or branch across to

another area of study at UG level, so long as specific entry requirements (including components of Additional and/or Specialist Learning (ASL)) had been met.

- There was some evidence that undergraduate courses in the broad areas covered by Creative and Media and Society, Health and Development were most likely to accept Diploma applicants from other subject areas. Courses in the broad areas of IT, Engineering and Construction and the Built Environment were more likely to accept only Diploma applicants studying this line. In practice, almost all applicants for 2010 entry had applied to undergraduate courses closely related to the Diploma they had followed, suggesting that young people embarking on level 3 Diplomas have carefully chosen a specialist pathway.
- Across the 271 courses for which entry requirements for Diploma applicants on the UCAS website were reviewed, in only four cases (in three institutions) was it explicitly stated that the Diploma would not be an acceptable qualification for entry. These were: Psychology (2 courses); Adult Nursing (1); and Human Biology (1). However, Diplomas were accepted by other institutions offering these courses.
- Where courses specified the ASL component of the Advanced Diploma, this was most commonly an A level. Only two HoAs knew of any courses within their institution specifying the nature of the Extended Project.
- As expected, the number of Diploma applicants to HEIs for 2010 entry was small, matching the small number of learners starting a Diploma at level 3 in 2008. Approximately 240 applications from Diploma candidates had been received, by February 2010, across the 18 institutions able to provide data (and whose intakes account for approximately one sixth of the volume of undergraduate higher education in England). It should be noted that the figure of 240 applications was unlikely to equate to 240 applicants, as UCAS allows students to choose to apply to up to five courses and there may therefore have been some multiple-counting of applicants in our sample.
- In line with the HEIs' expectations, Diploma applicants were from their established catchment areas, be these regional, national or both.
- The quality of applications from Diploma students was reported to be in line with the quality HEIs receive from A level candidates. All institutions which had already processed applications from Diploma applicants had made some offers.

Higher Education Context

All the HEIs in the sample had considered the impact of the impending demographic downturn of 18 year olds (from 2010) and the current recession on the sustainability of their current pattern of recruitment. Senior managers across all types of institutions reported the overriding impact of the recession to be an increase in undergraduate applications and this had lessened the concerns of normally 'recruiting institutions' that the demographic change would make undergraduate recruitment more difficult. In response

to the current funding situation in higher education, five institutions, of all types, were striving to increase the volume of overseas students. Over the next five years, a majority of institutions in the survey were also aiming to increase entry standards by setting higher thresholds for undergraduate entry and to maintain their efforts to widen participation.

In terms of developments in undergraduate teaching and learning, many institutions reported initiatives to enhance students' employability, including the provision of more opportunities for work-related learning and work placements, themes strikingly resonant with the formal aims of Diploma learning.

Knowledge and understanding of Diplomas

Levels of awareness and understanding of Diplomas amongst PVCs and HoAs was higher in the 2009/10 survey than in the previous year. Although it was reported that knowledge of Diplomas within academic departments was uneven, this was not considered to be problematic as departmental staff would use the HoA as the in-house expert to advise and support on Diploma-related matters. Departmental staff who had been involved with Diploma development either at the national or local level were understandably more likely to be better informed.

In general, senior managers felt that information about Diplomas had been effectively disseminated by the relevant government departments. Some mentioned DFE publications and website links as helpful. UCAS was identified by many HoAs as the most useful source of information. Institutions were currently waiting for confirmation from UCAS on how and when the Diploma results would be collated and presented to HEIs.

Engagement with Diploma development and delivery

Of the 15 institutions in the 2009/10 survey for which data was available, 11 reported some involvement in the development of one or more Diploma subject areas. Two institutions had been involved at the national level through Diploma Development Partnerships: both in relation to the Engineering Diploma. In the remaining cases, involvement was at the local level, working through the local Lifelong Learning Network and/or as a partner in a local Diploma consortium. Activities included involvement in the Gateway submission process; hosting meetings; contributing to discussions with local schools and colleges about Diploma curricula.

None of the PVCs interviewed was aware of any current involvement in delivery (compared to involvement by 4 out of 19 in 2008), but some would consider encouraging involvement with Diploma delivery by departmental staff if there were dedicated resources available. There was greatest enthusiasm for this amongst the teaching-led HEIs. Involvement in delivery could encompass a range of activities: teaching elements of the Diploma at local schools/colleges; teaching elements of the Diploma at the HEI to visiting learners; providing projects/challenges for young people to complete; providing content for teachers to use when delivering, e.g. information packs.

Progression pathways

Senior managers in most of the institutions sampled considered the Diploma to offer both a generic and a specialist pathway onto undergraduate study. Twelve of the 19 HoAs described the Diploma as a generic qualification, though almost all mentioned that some of their courses were specifying relevant ASL (such as Music A level to study Music). Three PVCs believed that young people choosing to do a Diploma had

taken a decision to follow a particular pathway and would therefore be likely to wish to continue in the same curriculum/sectoral area in higher education.

Amongst the sampled institutions, the first five Diploma subject areas were mentioned more frequently than the second group of five (with the exception of Manufacturing and Product Design) when PVCs were asked which lines were likely to become the most significant for their institution in terms of curriculum match and/or levels of recruitment. Creative and Media and Engineering were each mentioned by five institutions, though only one mentioned Construction and the Built Environment. Neither Hospitality nor Hair and Beauty Studies was mentioned as 'significant' by any institution.

PVCs identified those subject areas that seemed well aligned to current areas of undergraduate study offered at their institution, so constituting a potential progression pathway. The most commonly cited subject areas were (in descending order): IT; Creative and Media; Business, Finance & Administration; Society, Health and Development; Engineering. The least cited lines were (in descending order): Construction and the Built Environment; Hospitality; and Hair and Beauty Studies.

As with the 2008 sample, although many of the institutions in the 2009/10 survey had foundation degree provision, a large majority of institutions expected recruitment to be to their honours degree programmes, indicating that they were according the Diploma qualification the same status as A levels and expected Diploma applicants to be of a comparable quality to A level candidates. Institutions expected recruitment to be from their established catchments, be these regional, national or both.

Admissions practices

A large majority of institutions in the survey were willing, in principle, to recognise all of the first Diplomas as suitable preparation for undergraduate study. Understandably, this did not always mean that every Diploma would be accepted for every course of study. Across the 271 courses investigated on the UCAS website as part of this study, only four (in three institutions) explicitly stated that the Diploma would not be an acceptable qualification for entry.

In a large majority of cases, A level and Diploma students were being treated similarly in terms of entry requirements. In a very small number of cases, Diploma students were required to achieve higher *grades* than A level candidates or, conversely, were required to achieve a lower *tariff* score than A level applicants. There were some examples of Diploma students being requested to contact a relevant department or central admissions prior to applying. This may reflect unfamiliarity with the new qualification and its component elements on the part of departmental admissions staff.

In terms of the Additional and/or Specialist Learning element of the Diplomas, five of the six research-intensive HEIs reported applying specific A level requirements to most or all of their undergraduate courses in terms of subject area, though HoAs stressed that this level of prescription was generally in line with that imposed on A level candidates. There was greater flexibility in relation to ASL amongst the teaching-led HEIs.

Again, in common with their policy for A level students, research-intensive HEIs were much more likely to specify the grade (rather than tariff points) to be attained – both in relation to the Progression Diploma element and the Additional and/or Specialist Learning subject. Only two of the 19 institutions provided guidance as to the type of Extended Project they would prefer.

Not all departments in the institutions sampled had, by November 2009, specified publicly on the UCAS website their undergraduate entry requirements in respect of Diploma applicants, though 18 of the 19 institutions did make some reference to Diplomas in their current prospectus.

Applications from Diploma students

At the time the Head of Admissions interviews were undertaken (February 2010), approximately 240 applications had been received across the 18 institutions with data. Three institutions had received no applications at that time from young people taking a Diploma. Most institutions had received fewer than 10 applications, though three had received over 40. The small number of applications reflects the small number of learners commencing a level 3 Diploma amongst the first cohort in September 2008.

Across the subject areas, the approximate proportions among applications were: Society, Health and Development (29%); Engineering (27%); Creative and Media (24%); IT (15%) and Construction and the Built Environment (4%). Almost all the young people had applied to undergraduate courses closely aligned to the Diploma subject they had followed. The small percentage of applicants studying the Construction and the Built Environment Diploma mirrors the small number commencing this subject at level 3 in September 2008. Data published by UCAS in November 2010 indicated that the level of applications and the pattern across subject areas identified in our survey were representative of what was occurring at the national level.

The HoAs in our study reported positively on the quality of applications from Diploma students, indicating that these were in line with those received from A level candidates. Every institution which had already processed some Diploma applications had made one or more offers. It was not possible to gather precise data at this stage in the UCAS application process on the rate of conversion of applications to offers, nor on the number of offers likely to be accepted by Diploma students. Given the low level of applications, however, it was evident that there would be only a small entry of Diploma candidates to undergraduate courses in September 2010. This finding was confirmed subsequently by UCAS: 743 Diploma applications were identified by UCAS over the 2009/10 application cycle. Of these, 68% (503 students) had been accepted to a course at a higher education institution by 27 October 2010. This was very similar to the acceptance rate of all UCAS applicants: 70%. This suggests that HEIs of all kinds had accepted Diplomas as an appropriate pathway to undergraduate study.

The UCAS data also indicated that, although Diploma applicants were accepted across all Mission Groups, University Alliance and Million + institutions accepted the highest proportions. This was partly because they had received the greatest number of applications from Diploma students; they were also more likely to make offers to candidates.

HoAs had not, at the time of the interviews in February/March 2010, received confirmation from UCAS on how and when the results for Diploma students would be made available to HEIs.

Overall attitude of HEIs towards Diplomas at this stage

Thirteen of the 15 Pro Vice-Chancellors interviewed considered that Diploma learning was relevant to developments in undergraduate teaching and learning. The terms 'good fit' and 'good match' summed up the views of most PVCs. Of the ten PVCs who felt sufficiently knowledgeable to comment, six believed Diploma students would adapt 'very well' to undergraduate learning and four 'quite well'.

For the higher education institutions in this sample, Diplomas offered two main attractions: they may open up new routes into higher education for young people; there is a flexibility in the design and forms of learning they encompass which offers curriculum breadth, employer engagement, the application of knowledge and project-based learning. Two kinds of feature were mentioned as being least attractive. These were: uncertainty as to the strength of support across all political parties for Diplomas; and their denigration in the media.

Despite the uncertainties discussed above, a majority of PVCs reported clear support 'in principle' within their institution for Diplomas, ranging from the 'cautious' to the 'generally very strong'. As in the 2008 survey, the point was strongly made by some PVCs that the developing image of Diplomas within higher education would be closely related to Diploma students thriving and succeeding as undergraduates.

Policy implications

- The 2009/10 survey suggests that the readiness of HEIs to become involved in Diploma development had grown since the previous year. There was a willingness amongst some, mainly teaching-led institutions, to become involved in delivery, if additional resources were made available to HEIs for this.
- When asked about involvement in delivery, it was clear that most HEIs had a narrow view of what 'delivery' might involve. In their responses, they focused almost exclusively on consideration of class-based teaching by their staff of elements of the Diploma. It could be helpful to disseminate information to HEIs on the range of different ways in which they could support delivery.
- UCAS had received a number of queries from HEIs, schools and colleges in relation to the structure of Diplomas and how the final grade/tariff score was to be reached. The Diploma is a complex qualification and it is vital that information on how its tariff score is calculated is presented clearly and unambiguously to schools/colleges, students and parents so that young people can understand exactly what they need to achieve to satisfy the entry requirements of HEIs.
- The majority of institutions specifying what the Additional and/or Specialist Learning component of the Diploma should comprise required an A level in a subject related to the applicant's Diploma. As this suggests that Specialist Learning is preferred to Additional Learning at Level 3 by some HEIs, it is important to alert staff who deliver information, advice and guidance in schools and colleges of this finding, in order to make sure that they discuss with learners how choosing Additional Learning, instead of Specialist Learning, might constrain their choice of HEI and/or undergraduate course later.
- HEIs were keen to know how and when the results for Diploma students would be made available to them by UCAS. In a particularly competitive year for HE entry, it was considered important that these became available at the same time as results for A level students.
- Several findings relating to admissions policies and practices are relevant for specific dissemination to organisations with a role in supporting Diplomas:

- By November 2009, not all departments in the sample institutions had specified publicly on the UCAS website their undergraduate entry requirements in respect of Diploma applicants (relevant to UCAS e-updates to HEIs);
- Most HEIs expected Diploma subject areas to create clear-cut progression pathways into higher education. Across the first ten subjects, this expectation was strongest in the cases of: IT, Creative and Media, Business, Finance & Administration; Society, Health and Development; and Engineering (relevant to marketing by Diploma Development Partnerships and local consortia);
- It was expected that such pathways are likely to be established through traditional patterns of application and recruitment (regional and/or national), rather than through the specific stimulus of local 'widening participation' activity or foundation degree provision (relevant to marketing by Diploma Development Partnerships and local consortia).
- Although the number of applications to higher education in 2010 was small, matching the small number of learners commencing a Level 3 Diploma amongst the first cohort in 2008, what was clear was that the quality of the candidates had been comparable to that of A level applicants, and all HEIs (research-intensive and teaching-led institutions) receiving applications had made or were expecting to make offers to Diploma applicants. It will be important to publicise this finding widely, to allay worries amongst some schools/colleges, learners and parents that some types of HEIs will not accept Diplomas.
- Support for Diplomas among senior staff in higher education was widespread, regardless of institution type. This is a key finding of 2009/10 survey, of relevance to a range of audiences concerned with Diploma development.

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
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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.