
Outcomes for the first cohort of Diplomas learners

Sarah Lynch, Kelly Kettlewell, Clare Southcott and Tami McCrone

National Foundation for Educational Research

Background

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) and the University of Exeter were commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) to carry out a national evaluation of Diplomas. Diplomas for 14-19 year olds were introduced by the previous government as a major innovation in educational opportunity for young people in England, and were first taught in 2008.

The Diploma qualification comprises a number of components and is being offered at three levels: Foundation (Level 1); Higher (Level 2); and Progression/Advanced (Level 3). Learners doing a Foundation level Diploma can achieve grades A* to B and U.¹ In comparison, for a Higher level Diploma, learners can achieve grades A* to C and U. Progression/Advanced level Diploma learners can achieve grades A* to E and U. Diplomas are offered across 14 subjects and have been implemented in three phases (from September 2008, 2009 and 2010). The first cohort of learners who started the qualification in 2008 took one of the first five Diploma subjects: Construction and the Built Environment; Creative and Media; Engineering; Information Technology; and Society, Health and Development. Those who completed the Diploma typical two-year course did so in the summer 2010.

The main aims of the evaluation were to assess the impact of the Diplomas on learners – in terms of attainment of qualifications and progression to further (FE) and higher education (HE) and to review the implementation and delivery systems of Diplomas. This summary focuses on such impact for the first cohort of Diploma learners (those who did one of the first five Diploma subjects over the two academic years 2008/09 and 2009/10; analysis excluded learners who did a one-year course). This has been assessed by analysing nationally available datasets, which provide details of attainment and can be analysed to explore progression following the Diploma course². Telephone interviews were also conducted with 25 Year 12 learners and 17 'Year 14' learners who had participated in a Diploma either pre- or post-16. These

¹ A U grade is awarded to learners if insufficient scores are achieved for the principal learning and the project element of the Diploma and other components are achieved. The final Diploma grade is based on an aggregation of the principal learning and project results. All other Diploma components must be successfully completed but do not contribute to the overall Diploma grade.

² Datasets used were the Diploma Aggregation Service (DAS), the National Pupil Database (NPD), and the Individual Learner Record (ILR). See the main report for full explanations of the datasets and for information on limitations with the data and, therefore, the scope of the analysis. Please note that the Diploma figures reported may vary from other sources due to the processes used to match the DAS dataset to other datasets.

interviews illustrate the views of Diploma learners, but should not be generalised as numbers of interviewees were small.

The Diplomas have been reformed through the current government and updates can be found at: <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/qualifications/diploma/a0064056/diploma-announcements>

Key Findings

- A total of 3545 Year 11 learners and 696 Year 13 learners in the first Diploma cohort completed a Diploma.
- Most Diploma achievers were awarded a grade B or below for all levels of the Diploma, both pre-16 and post-16. A minority achieved grades A*/A (for example, 13 per cent at Foundation level, 11 per cent at Higher level pre-16, and three per cent at Advanced level post-16).
- Pre-16 Diploma participants scored higher overall at Key Stage 4 compared with other learners in their schools in a comparison group³.
- Overall, females and learners with higher prior attainment achieved a higher Diploma grade pre-16 and post-16.
- Learners interviewed reported finding principal learning, the project and employer involvement in the Diploma useful. Learners' awareness of Personal Learning and Thinking Skills (PLTS) and Additional and Specialist Learning (ASL) were limited, which might have contributed to the learners perceiving them as less useful. Views on functional skills were mixed.
- The majority of pre-16 Diploma learners had progressed to post-16 education destinations and were most likely to be attending an FE college. Data relevant to the destinations of the first post-16 Diploma cohort was not available for analysis, although a recent report published by UCAS⁴ showed that over two-thirds of all students who had undertaken a Progression or Advanced Diploma were accepted onto a HE course.

What can we say about the first Diploma cohort's experience and achievements?

A total of 3545 Year 11 learners completed a Diploma in the summer of 2010. Of these, the majority (86 per cent) of completers⁵ studied a Higher Diploma; 14 per cent studied a Foundation Diploma. Just under one third (32 per cent) completed an Engineering Diploma and just under one third (29 per cent) completed a Creative and Media Diploma. Subjects with the lowest number of completers were Construction and the Built Environment (12 per cent) and Society, Health and Development (12 per cent). These proportions

³ The comparison group consisted of learners in the same institutions and in the equivalent academic age groups to Diploma learners (Year 10/11 or Year 12/13 in September 2008-July 2010) but who do not appear in the Diploma participation data. As they are in the same institutions, we have compared Diploma learners with similar learners in similar schools/colleges where a Diploma was a potential option for them.

⁴ UCAS (2010) *UCAS 14-19 Diploma Project Findings*. [online]. Available: <http://www.ucas.ac.uk/documents/diploma/diplomaproject-findings.pdf> [9 May 2011].

⁵ Note that when the analysis discussed includes those who have received a U grade, we refer to them as '**completers**'. Diploma '**achievers**' are defined as those learners who received a grade A*-E (where relevant).

reflect national patterns of take-up of Diploma subjects. Most learners (91 per cent) took at least one GCSE as their ASL and just under a half (46 per cent) took at least one Vocationally Related Qualification (VRQ).

A total of 696 Year 13 learners completed a Diploma in the summer 2010. The majority (65 per cent) studied an Advanced Diploma; 14 per cent studied a Progression Diploma (Level 3), 13 per cent a Higher (Level 2) Diploma and eight per cent a Foundation (Level 1) Diploma. Between 20 and 25 per cent of learners completed a Creative and Media, Society, Health and Development, Information Technology or Engineering Diploma. Less than 10 per cent of learners completed a Construction and the Built Environment Diploma (which reflects lower proportions of learners taking up this Diploma subject post-16). On average, they completed just over one ASL qualification each. VRQs were the most frequently taken qualifications (56 per cent of learners), which *could* suggest they were Specialist learning qualifications.

Diploma grades

The evaluation found a similar pattern of Diploma achievement for pre-16 and post-16 learners. Achievement was concentrated in grade B and below for all levels of the Diploma both pre-16 and post-16. A minority achieved grades A*/A: for example 11 per cent at Higher level Diplomas pre-16 and three per cent at Advanced level post-16. This is compared with 30 per cent of all learners achieving A*/A grades for GCSE full courses in summer 2010 (seven per cent achieved an A* and 23 per cent an A) and 35 per cent of all learners who achieved A*/A grades at GCE A level in summer 2010 (eight per cent achieved an A* and 27 per cent a grade A)⁶. However, it should be acknowledged that achieving a Diploma A* or A grade is equivalent to achieving multiple GCSEs/A levels at A* or A grade (see main report Appendix A for equivalences) and therefore you might expect fewer A* or A grades amongst the Diploma cohort.

Amongst both pre-16 and post-16 age groups, females and learners with higher prior attainment achieved a higher grade for their Diploma (for all Diploma subjects), which is also consistent with factors associated with the national picture of qualification attainment.

Amongst pre-16 Diploma achievers only, those who achieved a Construction and the Built Environment, a Society, Health and Development or a Creative and Media Diploma achieved significantly lower Diploma grades than learners who achieved an Engineering Diploma. There were no significant differences between the Diploma grades for learners who achieved different Diploma subjects post-16. Post-16 learners in consortia in which leads had concerns about preparedness for Diplomas *prior* to delivery achieved higher Diploma grades, suggesting they worked hard to overcome any challenges. This was not significant pre-16.

⁶ Figures are from the Joint Council for qualifications: http://www.jcq.org.uk/national_results/index.cfm

Overall Key Stage 4 achievement⁷

In terms of overall Key Stage 4 point scores⁸, Diploma participants scored higher compared with other learners in their schools in a comparison group. However, some caveats should be considered when interpreting these findings. Firstly, the point score equivalences for Diplomas and other qualifications, such as GCSEs should be considered (see Appendix A in the main report for our understanding of equivalences). For example, a Diploma achieved at Higher level at any grade is equivalent to 5.5 GCSEs at the same grade, *plus* grades/points achieved for ASL qualifications. It may be, therefore, that a Diploma learner has more *opportunity* to achieve more/higher grades. Secondly, the analysis is based only on Diploma participants who had been *registered* on DAS (it *might* be the case that, as this was a new qualification with a new system of registering learners, by the time learners were registered some of the less able could have dropped out of the Diploma, leaving the more able learners to continue). It should be noted that learners who were never registered on DAS would appear in the comparison group rather than the participation group. It has unfortunately not been possible to explore whether Diploma learners score higher than comparison learners at Key Stage 5 due to limitations in being able to match learners with Key Stage 5 scores in the ILR to Diploma participants in DAS⁹.

Learners who participated in an Engineering Diploma scored highest overall at Key Stage 4; learners who did a Construction and the Built Environment Diploma scored the lowest (but still higher than the comparison group). Whilst females and Diploma learners scored higher *overall* at Key Stage 4, females who did Construction and the Built Environment Diploma and Creative and Media Diploma performed particularly well.

Diploma learners who participated in the Foundation level Diploma had *lower* overall Key Stage 4 point scores compared to other equivalent/comparable learners.

Some consortium-level variables had a significant influence on overall Key Stage 4 point scores. As was the case for Diploma grades for post-16 learners, pre-16 learners in consortia in which leads had concerns about preparedness for Diplomas *prior* to delivery achieved higher Diploma grades. Learners in larger consortia (with seven or more schools/colleges delivering Diplomas) scored higher at Key Stage 4. It *could* be the case that in larger consortia there was a particular perceived need amongst staff for better planning, for staff with a greater range of skills, and for enhanced communication between institutions and staff, which *could* lead to improved delivery and thus higher scores. Where consortia crossed local authority boundaries, learners scored lower. It *could* be that in such consortia learners were travelling some distances to and from institutions at the detriment to their academic performance (as time for learning was

⁷ We had hoped to also conduct analysis of overall Key Stage 5 achievement for post-16 learners, but the data available was not robust enough for this analysis to be feasible. Key Stage 5 scores were only available on the ILR for approximately one third of Year 13 learners; missing data could be due to learners not doing qualifications with Key Stage 5 point scores attached (i.e. lower level courses) or not completing courses. When matching the one third of learners with Key Stage 5 scores to Diploma participants in DAS, the proportion of learners with data available was too small to be able to carry out meaningful analysis of overall achievement at Key Stage 5 of Diploma learners versus comparison learners.

⁸ Key Stage 4 point score is made up of *all* relevant qualifications that carry a point score (not just the Diploma for Diploma learners).

⁹ See main report Section 1.2.1 for full explanation.

spent travelling), although evidence from the evaluation to date has not revealed concerns amongst learners in relation to travelling to learn.

Learners' perceptions of their achievements

Interviews with learners provided an illustration of views of young people in relation to Diploma achievement, although findings should not be generalised, as numbers of interviewees are small. Nevertheless, learners interviewed in both age groups were generally satisfied with their Diploma experience and the grade they achieved. Learners reported finding principal learning, the project and employer involvement in the Diploma useful. The range of topics covered by the principal learning component was considered helpful for deciding future pathways. The project was useful for developing communication, research and team working skills and, post-16, for preparation for assignments in HE. Employer involvement helped learners gain a valuable insight into the way companies operate. Learners' awareness of PLTS and ASL was limited and these components were seen to be less useful, possibly due to a lack of awareness.

There were mixed views about functional skills amongst both age groups; some reported that they would be beneficial when applying for work, whereas others had found them difficult or too similar to core GCSE subjects.

Most of the young people interviewed felt satisfied with their experience (16 of the 25 learners who did a Diploma pre-16 and 13 of the 17 who did a Diploma post-16 were *very* or *quite satisfied*). Most pre-16 learners (16) and around half (nine) post-16 learners would recommend the Diploma to another learner, which reflects their largely positive experience of studying for this qualification, particularly pre-16. The majority of learners pre-16 (13) said they would choose the Diploma again. Post-16, around a third (seven) reported they would do a Diploma again; a similar proportion would not due to concerns about progression (a few perceived that universities would not accept Diplomas as entry to HE). Reasons for dissatisfaction included: lack of course organisation and a lack of practical elements to the course.

What can we say about the first Diploma cohort's progression pathways?

The majority of pre-16 Diploma learners had progressed to post-16 education destinations and were most likely to be attending an FE college. Those who did a Foundation level Diploma pre-16 were more likely than those who did a Higher Level to progress to an FE/HE college; those who did a Higher level were more likely than learners who did Foundation level to go to a school with a sixth form. Data relevant to the destinations of the first post-16 Diploma cohort was not available for analysis, although a recent report published by UCAS showed that over two-thirds of all students who had undertaken a Diploma were accepted onto a HE course. The findings on destinations imply that the Diploma has contributed towards learners' progression. Indeed, the Diploma qualification is now included in the course entry requirements for FE and HE institutions, providing further evidence of its positive exchange value when young people are applying for either post-16 or post-18 courses. Learners' decisions on which pathways to pursue were influenced by their Diploma (many went on to study the same subject area, for instance), suggesting that they do not just value their Diploma experience in isolation from their future plans but that it has achieved a significant place in their decision-making process.

What are the implications for policy and practice?

- **Understanding among HE Staff:** While learners were satisfied with the Diploma experience and their level of achievement, some reported a lack of understanding among HE staff regarding the Diploma qualification. However, this was the first cohort to apply to HE so this was not entirely unexpected. Our survey of HEIs in 2009/10¹⁰ found increasing levels of awareness of the qualification and its relevance to undergraduate study. Building on this will be instrumental for the Diploma to be used by young people for entry to HE.
- **Diploma components:** Learners' lack of awareness and understanding of ASL and PLTS means that they are less likely to value these components of the Diploma. If these two elements are to be maintained as part of the qualification then there needs to be considerable raising of learner's awareness and understanding of them, without which the educational benefit of these elements will not be realised. It should be noted that evidence from our survey of HEIs revealed that some HEIs request certain qualifications as ASL for entry on to some HE courses, indicating the importance they place on the ASL component. In addition, the Education and Skills survey of 694 employers, conducted in 2010¹¹, revealed that improving the employability skills of young people entering the labour market is businesses' top priority for both schools and universities (PLTS could be particularly relevant here). There was some learner dissatisfaction with functional skills. These were considered too similar to GCSEs, not relevant or too challenging. This indicates that a collaborative approach by policy makers and practitioners could be helpful to ensure that functional skills are embedded effectively within the Diploma. If this is achieved, learners could be more motivated and committed when they can see the value, relevance and utility of studying functional skills.
- **Unit re-takes:** There was evidence from interviews with learners that some who had failed units of the Diploma did not always have the opportunity to re-take them. It was not clear from the qualitative data if failed units had been assessed via controlled assessments which might be difficult for teachers to re-schedule due to time constraints; this should be explored, as it is important to consider whether it is necessary for learners to re-take units in order to progress following their Diploma.

¹⁰ See Haynes, G. and Richardson, W. (2011). *Evaluation of the implementation and impact of diplomas: findings from the 2009/10 survey of higher education institutions* [online]. Available:

<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DFE-RR093>

¹¹ See CBI/ETI(2010). *Ready to grow: business priorities for education and skills. Education and skills survey, 2010* [online]. Available:

<http://www.cbi.org.uk/ndbs/content.nsf/802737AED3E3420580256706005390AE/C4393B860D00478E802576C6003B0679>

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 Department for Education.