
National Evaluation of Diplomas: Cohort 1 – the second year

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Background

The introduction of Diplomas for 14-19 year olds represented a major innovation in educational opportunity for young people in England. The Diplomas are being offered at three levels and across 14 subjects and have been implemented in three phases (from September 2008, 2009 and 2010). 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 second year of delivery of the first cohort of Diploma learners (who started their Diploma in September 2008) who were able to study any of the first five subjects: Construction and the Built Environment; Creative and Media; Engineering; Information Technology; and Society, Health and Development. It presents the findings from surveys of pre- and post-16 Diploma learners (n=477 and n=86, respectively) and comparison learners (n=680 and n=131, respectively), and a survey of Diploma teachers (n=86). In addition, case-study visits to 15 consortia took place, consisting of in-depth interviews with Diploma learners in Years 11 and 13, and key stakeholders including consortium leads, Diploma subject leads and teachers, senior managers, and Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) coordinators.

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

Key Findings

- Young people considered that they were progressing well with their Diploma and many were satisfied with their learning experience. Learners had gained subject-specific knowledge, developed their independent learning, personal and social skills and had benefited from the broader horizons they had gained through exposure to the world of work.
- Learners were not always clear about course content and the component parts, the style of learning or the balance of practical and applied approaches.
- The majority of learners who had taken a Diploma in Years 12 and 13 intended to progress to higher education and, of those who had applied, the majority had been offered places.
- Consortia were moving more towards an in-house only Diploma delivery model in order to overcome the logistical challenges of collaborative working, although there were examples of the value of the partnership approach.
- Employers were widely used to support delivery of the Diploma typically by hosting visits, providing speakers and providing work experience placements. This experience was generally valued, but there was a view amongst learners that they would have liked more contact with employers.
- Young people had generally noted the difference in their Diploma lessons; teachers placed greater emphasis on applying the subject matter to industry or a work-related area, acted more as a facilitator or guide to the learning process and encouraged students to adopt a more independent learning approach. Teachers faced some challenges in developing independent learning skills amongst some learners and found it challenging to complete the course in the guided learning hours.
- There had been some progress with assessment, including the establishment of domain and lead assessors and in teachers' understanding of the assessment process, yet there was still scope to enhance teachers' understanding of the evidence required for assessment.
- Functional skills emerged as the component of the Diploma that had been most problematic; some learners did not think they were progressing well, particularly in mathematics. The potential for personalised learning through Additional and Specialist Learning (ASL) had yet to be fully realised largely due to the challenge of providing a full range of ASL opportunities within an institution and the constraints of providing consortium-wide ASL, resulting from timetabling and logistical challenges.

What has been the impact of the Diplomas?

The young people in Years 11 and 13 generally considered that they were progressing well with their Diploma and their teachers agreed with this. There is also evidence of many young people being satisfied with their experience of taking a Diploma. Diploma learners who were interviewed noted having a more independent style of learning, taking more responsibility for their learning, and appreciating that the course was more closely related to the workplace and had involved employers. Smaller classes were felt to give them greater access to teachers and a more relaxed learning environment. Teachers noted that learners had gained subject-specific knowledge, developed their independent learning, personal and social skills and had benefited from the broader horizons they had gained through exposure to the world of work.

It is evident that where learners had engaged in work experience, were aware of the ASL components in their Diploma and felt that they were progressing well in their principal learning, they were more satisfied with the experience. Moreover, a positive learning experience

seemed related less to the specific Diploma subject, or the consortium where they were studying, but more to the organisation and preparedness for teaching at the individual course level.

In terms of future progression, the majority of learners who had taken a Diploma in Years 12 and 13 intended to progress to higher education and, of those who had applied, the majority had been offered places. The majority of Diploma students in Year 11 planned to remain in learning, including through work-based routes such as an Apprenticeship or job with training. While some of those in Year 11 anticipated that their future progression would be related to their Diploma subject area, as many said that they would pursue an alternative subject in future. This indicated that young people's take up of a Diploma at 14 had not constrained their future subject choices. To maximise impact, the options for future progression need to be provided to learners, and as the Diplomas become more established such information can be increasingly based on evidence and examples from Diploma learners who progressed through a variety of routes.

Those surveyed in Year 13 were more likely to be satisfied and were more content with their Diploma than those in Year 11. Amongst both year groups, a notable minority were less satisfied with their Diploma experience, most often because:

- their expectations were not met particularly in terms of the amount of practical work and work-related learning
- the functional skills component which some had found difficult to pass
- the amount and challenging nature of the course content
- the teaching and management of the Diploma could have been better, particularly in terms of the pacing of work across the two years.

To maximise success and impact of the Diploma, it is clear that learners need to be clear about course content and the component parts (and the effect of not achieving these components), style of learning (particularly the need to work independently) and the balance of practical and applied approaches through the provision of IAG and an informed selection process. Throughout the two years of the evaluation, IAG has emerged as a key influential factor on the success of the Diplomas. Good teaching and management are also important to maximise impact of the Diploma.

How is the management of Diplomas progressing?

Consortium membership had remained stable across the two years of delivery and there were indications that approaches and procedures such as those relating to quality assurance, IAG, assessment and timetabling, were becoming more established. Nevertheless, it is apparent that Diploma delivery in the first two years entailed complex delivery models in some areas with associated challenges in acknowledging institutional independence, while seeking a collaborative approach. The removal of the requirement for the Diploma entitlement, which was one of the main factors leading to a collaborative, consortium approach, accords with the developments in practice among consortia which were moving more to an in-house only delivery model where possible, as this minimised the challenges of learners travelling to learn, timetabling, and assuring quality across institutions. However, the evaluation has also shown that some institutions value working in partnership with other providers and that there is clearly demand from learners for Diploma subjects. Institutions will therefore need to explore how best to continue to offer choice to learners, particularly where within an institution there may be a lack of specialist facilities and expertise, or insufficient numbers to constitute a viable course.

Funding for Diploma development was considered to have been effective in providing the right conditions for establishing the first five Diploma subjects, but there was widespread concern from consortium leads and institutional managers that future funding was uncertain, and that this could affect sustainability of current provision.

In terms of preparation for the Diploma entitlement, which was then a requirement but has now been rescinded, while all but two consortia said that they were planning to provide this in 2013, there were a number of barriers to achieving this including lack of demand, facilities and commitment.

How is Diploma teaching and assessment progressing?

Teachers had generally adapted their **teaching** style at least to some extent in order to deliver Diploma qualifications. Such changes included a greater emphasis on applying the subject matter to industry or a work-related area, acting more as a facilitator or guide to the learning process and encouraging students to adopt a more independent learning approach. They generally welcomed the opportunity to teach 'holistically' by working across units. Young people had generally noted the difference in their Diploma lessons and felt that the classes were smaller and, although the workload was greater than other qualifications, they were gaining more skills and experience.

To provide this learning experience, teachers had encountered some challenges in terms of developing the independent learning skills of students, maintaining their motivation and engagement, for example where the course did not meet their expectations, and maintaining their subject knowledge. This again emphasises the need to identify the most appropriate learners to participate in a Diploma. Teachers also reported challenges in achieving the workload in the guided learning hours. Teachers had sometimes been quite creative in terms of delivery in order to cover the components within the correct guided learning hours (for example, using the students 'best subject' as their ASL and encouraging students to use their part-time jobs to evidence work experience). They also noted the challenge, albeit sometimes a positive challenge, of working collaboratively with colleagues within and outside their institution and the challenge of keeping up to date with relevant industrial developments to inform delivery of the principal learning.

Establishing a strategy and procedure for monitoring and assuring quality of teaching when Diplomas were being delivered in partnership between institutions had been a key concern for consortia in the first year of delivery and, in the second year, they appeared to have made progress. There was evidence of consortia-wide procedures, such as agreed protocols, standardisation meetings and observations of teaching taking place in the majority of consortia visited. Consortia were working through a number of challenges to institute these procedures such as ensuring observation procedures complied with existing agreements and practice and exploring how best to minimise discrepancies in the implementation of procedures between institutions.

Teachers' understanding of, and readiness for, the **assessment** of Diplomas has been a key issue through the evaluation of the first two years of Diploma delivery, with concerns about the level of preparedness prior to delivery and assessment continuing to be an area for development (for example, there remains scope for improving levels of staff understanding and confidence particularly in relation to controlled assessment requirements and the type of evidence required from learners for the principal learning and project). Some teachers reported that assessment was not aligned closely enough with the applied nature of the Diploma. However, in the second year it was apparent that there had been some progress, including the establishment of domain and lead assessors and in teachers' understanding of the assessment process. Key contributions to this were training from awarding bodies,

meetings with suitable time allocations and experienced staff fulfilling the assessors' role. Nevertheless, there remains scope, particularly in light of the reduction in the central support for the assessment of Diplomas, to enhance teachers' understanding of the evidence required for assessment. Awarding bodies need to play an increased role in the provision of more focused support and guidance relating to the assessment requirements, including provision of a range of exemplars that are more closely aligned with the assessment criteria.

How well were the different components of the Diploma delivered?

Functional skills emerged as the component of the Diploma that had been most problematic in terms of delivery and assessment in the first cohort. While it was apparent that some Diploma learners felt that they were progressing well in this component, others were not and this was particularly the case for mathematics. Teachers were also concerned about delivery of functional skills and the impact of not achieving it at the right level on achievement of the overall Diploma qualification. In contrast to the original intention that functional skills would be embedded in principal learning, delivery tended to be discrete and this was driven mainly by the need to ensure that learners achieved the component, and the need for specialist staff to teach it. The Diploma reforms could usefully examine the role of functional skills.

The delivery of Diplomas in the first cohort had yet to fully maximise the potential of the **ASL** component. Staff interviewed felt that the potential for personalised learning through ASL had yet to be fully realised largely due to the challenge of providing a full range of ASL opportunities within an institution and the constraints of providing consortium-wide ASL resulting from timetabling and logistical challenges. It also emerged that a notable proportion of young people were not aware of any ASL component in their Diploma. Those who were aware were more satisfied with their Diploma experience.

For those taking a Level 3 Diploma, ASL has a particular purpose in either assisting, or potentially inhibiting, a learner's progression to higher education. It was apparent that learners who are not aware of specific subject requirements for entry to a particular HEI course, and who therefore did not take this for their ASL, could subsequently find they cannot progress onto their preferred course. This highlights the importance of seeking information on HEIs' requirements for entry, taking these into consideration, and ensuring that learners are guided to take an appropriate course for their ASL.

Personal, learning and thinking skills were widely welcomed by staff who reported that there had been few difficulties in incorporating them within the Diploma, although approaches to assessing PLTS were inconsistent.

The evidence suggests that the **project** element of the Diploma can provide an important opportunity for personalised and independent learning where it is well managed and it was generally well-received as a Diploma component. However, it was evident that some teachers felt the time allocated for the project was under-estimated.

It was more likely for learners to have undertaken some form of activity with an employer, such as a visit, attending a talk or undertaking a project, than having undertaken a **work placement**. While this employer experience was generally valued, the prevailing view among Diploma learners who were interviewed was that they would have liked more contact with employers as part of their Diploma course. The involvement of employers in the Diploma was a key element associated with learners' satisfaction with the course. Those that had taken part in work experience were significantly more satisfied with their Diploma course. Continuing to build on relationships with employers at a local level is central to the future success of the Diploma.

Policy implications

- **Maximising the impact of Diplomas:** The Diploma reforms may wish to take into account how to minimise the impact of the functional skills on Diploma progress and achievement while considering how best to prepare young people for the world of work with the generic skills and attributes that will assist them in gaining employment. It is evident that young people who take Diplomas are as likely to intend to progress to higher education as their peers and as likely to have been accepted for a place. There would be value in disseminating this evidence more widely to address any perceptions that a Diploma is not appropriate for progression to higher education.
- **Management:** Given the removal of the entitlement, and the need to collaborate, it would be worth exploring ways to encourage the continuation of communication across all institutions (and hubs where they exist) within a consortium and across consortia, while at the same time simplifying management structures. This will facilitate rapid decision-making and the sharing of lessons learnt (for example in terms of IAG, training, employer engagement and best ways to deliver Diploma components).
- **Collaboration:** While many institutions recognised the benefits of collaboration, institutions have been adopting an increasingly pragmatic approach to collaboration and shared delivery models, based on cost-effectiveness and student demand. The removal of the requirement for consortium collaboration and hence the freedom for institutions to decide which Diploma subjects to offer and the best manner of doing so fits well with the approach which institutions favour.
- **Diploma components:** It may be worth investigating further how far the ASL currently adds value to the overall Diploma qualification. Awarding bodies could usefully review the wording and presentation of Functional Skills examination questions. In addition, there may be value in reviewing the Guided Learning Hours that are required to adequately prepare Diploma learners for the assessments.
- **Teaching:** It is evident that the Diploma approach was viewed as entailing more work for teachers than other qualifications in terms of preparation and delivery. It may be worth reviewing how far this is an issue of commencing delivery of a new and unfamiliar qualification or whether it is inherent to the Diploma approach. The Diploma was also considered to entail a higher workload for students in terms of achieving the requirements within the expected guided learning hours. There may be value in reviewing the guided learning hours to ensure they are sufficient as part of the review leading to a more streamlined Diploma.
- **Assessment:** In view of the change of policy with regard to the withdrawal of the entitlement requirement (and associated lack of need to collaborate) there may be a need to review the lead assessor's role. It is possible that, as more institutions offer Diplomas in-house, the need for consistency of assessment standards across Diploma subjects may be more challenging and therefore more time-consuming. The evidence also suggests that there is a need for earlier and more comprehensive support from awarding bodies, as well as consistent guidance and communication to all institutions across a consortium, in order to promote widespread confidence with regard to assessment. It may be useful to consider ways in which to ensure that all learners receive clear and consistent information about expectations and processes required in order to successfully complete the qualification.
- **IAG:** There is a clear need for young people to be well informed about the Diploma in order to ensure that the course meets their expectations, and that they are able to cope with the demands of the course.

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 DFE.