
Learning for Labour: specialist diplomas and 14-19 education

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ABSTRACT The 2006 Education Act provided an entitlement for all 14 year-olds to take a specialist diploma from 2013. Despite concerns of many educationalists and politicians, the first diplomas will begin in September 2008. New Labour claims that the diplomas are innovative and challenging; however, this article argues that they exhibit many of the weaknesses and contradictions of existing vocational qualifications, will accentuate divisions and represent a further move away from a comprehensive curriculum. The article also argues, however, that in addition to opposing the introduction of the diplomas, reformers must rethink approaches towards vocational learning in schools.

Despite reports of ministers wanting to delay implementation, the Government has given the go-ahead for five new specialist diplomas to begin from September 2008 in a limited number of schools and colleges. The 2006 Education Act gave young people a 'national entitlement' to study one of 14 vocational areas outlined in the 2005 14-19 White Paper (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2005). According to the White Paper, up to 40% of Key Stage 4 students will be taking one by 2013. A level 2 diploma will equate to General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) grade C, occupying about half of the total timetable space. Level 1 can be used in conjunction with the White Paper's proposals for a new workplace-based learning route for more 'disaffected' students, while post-16 students can follow a two-year level 3 qualification which, like current vocational qualifications, would constitute the majority of their study time.

Education and the Economy: a new correspondence?

The White Paper emphasises the importance of responding to globalisation and increased international competition by improved educational provision, particularly vocational education. The Government wants the diplomas to 'put

employers in the driving seat'; consequently, Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) have been assigned a leading role in diploma design.

We cannot automatically assume that SSC involvement will raise the currency of the diploma with individual employers. Furthermore, the need to meet government deadlines has resulted in the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) taking an increased role in overseeing diploma development. In fact QCA material now plays down the direct vocational relevance of the diplomas and instead emphasises their status as an alternative 'applied' qualification. As with existing vocational qualifications, for the majority of diploma students learning will continue to be classroom, not workplace based and remain teacher directed. They will be required to complete 10 days' work experience, but this is invariably what many Year 10 or 11 students do now.

At a general level, there is also an issue about whether concentrating on one vocational area will help the 'employability' of young people. For example, the same White Paper points to the transient nature of employment in the twenty-first century, explaining that young people must expect to work across several employment sectors during their working lives. If this is true, then rather than locking into a narrow specialisation at 14, a good general education and the development of a wide range of personal skills would seem more appropriate.

Unfortunately, rather than embracing the world of the 'knowledge worker', the reality facing many young people could be very different. The Government continues to predict a general 'upskilling', but for others, the twenty-first century economy is likely to be increasingly polarised (Henwood, 2003), or 'hourglass' (Cruddas et al, 2002), with as many low-paid 'Mcjobs' as new professional and managerial opportunities.

Functional Skills

The introduction of 'functional skills' is the result of Confederation of British Industry (CBI) criticism of school-leavers' abilities in mathematics and English 'basics' (CBI, 2006); however, employer condemnation of young people is not new. As Rikowski (2006) wryly observes:

After James Callaghan's Ruskin College Speech of 1976 and the resulting Great Debate on Education, the 1988 Education Reform Act, ushering in the National Curriculum, national testing, SATs, league tables, and then Ofsted, together with New Labour's focus on standards early on after 1997 and then the introduction of the Literacy and Numeracy Hours – and school-leavers' reading, writing and maths are still inadequate for employers! The CBI Report could have easily have been written in the 1970s or 1980s.

Each diploma will require students to pass functional skills, (an amalgam of current 'key skills' and 'skills for life' qualifications) in English, mathematics and information and communications technology (ICT), but functional skills will

also be a compulsory part of GCSE syllabuses, and students will not be able to obtain a mathematics and English GCSE without them. Many diploma students, particularly those at level 1, could be restricted to functional skills work, alarming English teachers seeking to safeguard the more creative aspects of their subject. In addition, we should expect humanities, arts and modern foreign languages (already no longer included in the Key Stage 4 mandatory core) to be absent from diploma students' timetables.

School and Further Education: reconfirming a two-tier system

It is in the way in which diplomas are to be delivered that the uncertainties are the most pronounced. As the White Paper recognises, it is unlikely that individual schools will be able to offer more than one, at most two, of the diplomas and few will have the resources to offer more specialist areas like Construction and the Built Environment. The government plan to establish 200 vocational schools and the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust website (<http://www.specialistschools.org.uk>) lists the 'trailblazing' schools already identified. New Academies programmes, particularly in city areas where there is both commercial sponsorship and support from local labour councils, could also be particularly significant as a Trojan horse for establishing the new diplomas.

The main vehicle for diploma delivery, however, will be a network of local partnerships, involving local education authorities (LEAs) and Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs). 'In every area, providers will ensure that between them they are making a full offer' (DfES, 2006, 7.25). The number of school students attending college for part of the week is predicted to increase significantly. As a result of the *Increasing Flexibility* scheme up to 120,000 14-16 year-olds currently attend further education colleges for at least a day a week. However, according to the DfES, as 350,000 14-16 year-olds could be enrolled, further education attendance may double (DfES, 2006).

Despite increased collaboration with schools, colleges continue to be the poor relation. Unable to compete with school sixth forms, which enjoy significant funding advantages, many colleges have abandoned A-level teaching altogether. Salaries of further education teaching staff still remain up to 30% less than those of school teachers in equivalent positions. The fact that further education colleges will continue to provide a disproportionate number of level 1 and level 2 diploma courses will compound these differences, and as a result of cutbacks in provision for adult learning, leave colleges in danger of becoming the new 'tertiary moderns'.

Research findings about the experiences of 14-16 year-olds in colleges have been positive, but there is concern whether colleges can provide adequate support for these increased numbers. There is also concern about child protection issues and whether school students would always be taught by a trained teacher. New systems of monitoring attendance and travelling arrangements would also be required (National Union of Teachers [NUT],

2007). Many students, however, may not want to 'travel to learn' for part of the week and opt for the vocational courses their schools currently offer. This would suit cash-strapped schools and avoid them having to hand over resources (we assume that students migrating to further education will take funds with them) or lose teaching staff. So rather than actively supporting the local partnerships, schools may be just as likely to look after their immediate interests. Research by LEACAN, a network of LEA inspectors and consultants (LEACAN, 2006), shows many schools and LEAs unprepared for the diplomas, not convinced about their potential success and unclear why they are needed at all. The speed at which the diplomas are to be introduced – final syllabus details are still not available, the lack of input of teachers and lecturers and absence of professional development has worried both the University and College Union (UCU) and the NUT.

The Real Crisis of Vocational Qualifications

Employer representatives have been present on bodies like BTEC and City & Guilds that have delivered full-time vocational education courses, but their input has been ad hoc. Rather than developing real employment skills, vocational qualifications, despite being promoted as new-style 'competences', have continued to be used to manage changes in the composition of the secondary school population, and as a response to behaviour problems and disaffection; in short, as a new form of social control (Allen & Ainley, 2007).

In the 1970s, for example, new courses, many with a workplace theme, were introduced for those 15 year-olds who, as a result of the raising of the school-leaving age (known as ROSLA), now remained in school for another year, while in the 1980s, jobless school leavers were provided with compulsory Youth Training Schemes (YTS) – which Finn (1987) aptly described as 'training without jobs'. In the 1990s, a period which Allen & Ainley refer to as 'education without jobs', qualifications like the General National Vocation Qualification (GNVQ) were established to serve a new cohort of students who, after the failure of youth training and the continuing uncertainty in the job market, were remaining in full-time education for much longer.

GNVQs should be seen as another attempt at constructing a 'technical' stream. However, they continued to suffer from 'academic drift' as students used them as educational qualifications to enter higher education – invariably post-1992 'new' universities rather than Russell.

As GNVQs became Vocational Certificates in Education (VCEs) and then applied A-levels, students have experienced the worst of both worlds with a qualification that could only imitate the status of its A-level counterpart and no longer provided a different sort of learning experience. As the number of students taking VCEs stagnated, other qualifications like BTEC Nationals – officially given the kiss of death by the introduction of GNVQ – have resurfaced as alternatives.

After the rejection of Tomlinson's comparatively modest proposals for linking academic and vocational learning through an overarching certificate, the vocational diplomas represent an attempt to consolidate Sir Ron Dearing's 'pathways' approach of the 1990s, representing a 'middle' track between academic and workplace learning. Yet ironically, it may be the A-level that will occupy this position (Allen, 2006). As well as excusing themselves from participating in local learning partnerships, private schools and elite state schools may continue to gravitate towards the International Baccalaureate or the new Cambridge Pre-U award. If A-levels become a second-division academic qualification, then the status of the level 3 diploma becomes even more uncertain.

Rethinking Vocationalism

This year's NUT conference called for a halt to the diploma programme and for a national review of vocational education. With another ROSLA looming, we should continue to support all attempts to improve the quality and status of vocational learning. Vocational learning post-16 must be accompanied by guarantees of worthwhile employment, while at post-14 it should only remain a subject option, rather than serving as an alternative track for 'non-academic' students. However, our conception of vocationalism has to be broadened. All students should have the right to learn particular occupational skills of their choice, but there must also, as part of any core curriculum, be an entitlement to a more general intellectual and critical understanding of the world of work. A precedent to this argument can be found in the work of early twentieth-century educationalist John Dewey, who, in opposition to a narrow trade learning, argued as follows:

An education which acknowledges the full intellectual and social meaning of a vocation would include instruction in the historic background of present conditions; training in dealing with material and agencies of production; and study of economics, civics, and politics, to bring the future worker into touch with the problems of the day and the various methods proposed for its improvement. Above all, it would train power of re adaptation to changing conditions so that future workers would not become blindly subject to a fate imposed upon them. (Dewey, 1916, pp. 318-319)

Suffice to say, 'Deweyfication' of the curriculum would also require radical changes to other aspects of education, but it can still provide a starting point to mobilise around.

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