FORUM
Volume 51, Number 1, 2009
www.wwwords.co.uk/FORUM

Crunch Time for the Diplomas: will they survive?

MIKE BAKER

ABSTRACT This article looks at the introduction of the diplomas as part of the 14-19 reforms in England. It questions whether they can survive the low initial take-up from students, the lack of interest from key parts of the schools sector, and the confusing messages about what sort of qualification they are meant to be. It also asks whether the diplomas will be undermined by a misguided search for 'parity of esteem'.

They have cost £65.2 million over the past three years. Over the next three years they will cost an additional £373 million. Publicity and marketing alone has cost more than £7 million over the past two years. Yet, at the start of the academic year, just 12,026 students had enrolled on the new diplomas, fewer than 2,000 of them at Level 3.[1] Is it all going to be worth it?

The diplomas represent potentially the biggest curriculum and assessment reform in English secondary schools since the introduction of GCSEs over 20 years ago. The political and educational stakes are high. They could, after innumerable failed attempts, bridge the academic/vocational divide. They are critical to the success of the policy to raise the education-leaving age to 18 and they are central to Gordon Brown's mission to improve the nation's skill levels.

Yet the diplomas could turn out to be a damp squib. If they continue to be ignored by the majority of schools, and if they fail to appeal to students and parents, they could mean the squandering of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money on a missed opportunity. That would be a political embarrassment for Gordon Brown and his Schools Secretary, Ed Balls. It would be intensely frustrating for those schools that have embraced the diploma. Most seriously, it would be an enormous setback for the attempt to provide a curriculum that interests and excites those students who are not switched on by GCSEs and A-levels.

The critical moment will come once we know how many students have enrolled for diploma courses starting in autumn 2009. For now, though, all eyes

are focused on the 1,300 schools and colleges that have already started to teach the first five new diplomas in: IT, Engineering, 'Construction and the Built Environment', 'Society, Health & Development', and 'Creative & Media'. The first batch of students needs to be a success. They represent only about a quarter of the total the government originally hoped for in the first year. Ministers tried to put a positive spin on the numbers, saying they compared well to previous new qualification launches. Besides, they added, it was quality not quantity that counted. That sounded like an attempt to whistle bravely in the dark.

However, there are some positive signs. Although diplomas have not registered strongly with parents or students, there has at least been broad enthusiasm from schools for the principles behind them. Yet scratch a little deeper and it seems most head teachers are disappointed that the diplomas no longer deliver the original aims of the Tomlinson Report of 2004, which argued that a new diploma system should replace all existing qualifications, including GCSEs and A-levels.[2] The then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, was unwilling to risk sacrificing A-levels. Many believe his decision doomed the diploma reforms to failure.

Back in 2004, Sir Mike Tomlinson told the government 'the status quo is not an option'. He added that it was equally undesirable to have 'piecemeal change' of the curriculum and examination system. His committee's proposal of 20 new diplomas to replace GCSEs and A-levels and the alphabet soup of vocational qualifications was essential, he argued, to end the current weaknesses in the education system, namely: 'too many young people leaving education lacking basic and personal skills', 'a low staying-on rate post 16', and an examination system which was 'too great a burden' on students and teachers.

The government agreed with Tomlinson's diagnosis but only partially accepted his solution. The big question is whether the current diplomas can deliver now that, instead of having the field to themselves, they must compete in a very crowded qualifications market. One worrying sign is that grammar and independent schools have shown no enthusiasm at all for the diplomas, raising fears that they will be seen as a 'second-class' qualification. These schools are increasingly looking to alternatives such as the International Baccalaureate (IB), the Cambridge Pre-U, and the AQA Bac, which they hope will give their students a 'unique selling point' with universities. The planned vocational version of the IB will not help.

Another big concern is the response of employers and business. Although the CBI broadly welcomed the plans for the first 14 work-related diplomas, it was not happy about the government's decision to add three more diplomas in purely academic subjects, namely languages, humanities and sciences, from 2011. CBI Director-General, Richard Lambert, said introducing diplomas in these subjects 'runs the risk of undermining the integrity of these traditional academic subjects'. He also feared 'they could also be a distraction from the need to raise the numbers of young people studying science and maths'.

This criticism surprised and stung the government. In August 2008, the Schools Minister, Jim Knight, hit back, insisting the academic diplomas would

'boost young people's participation in science and languages'. He announced that major employers, including AstraZeneca and British Airways, would be involved alongside Oxford University in developing the content of each of these diplomas. For the government, the academic diplomas are not a 'distraction' but essential to the reputation of diplomas which ministers want to be as much of a route to university as A-levels.

Aside from these specific concerns, perhaps the biggest worry about diplomas is that the history of recent large-scale education reforms suggests they rarely run smoothly. From the introduction of the National Curriculum through to the A-level changes of 'Curriculum 2000', including the ill-starred Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education (the 'vocational A-level'), all qualification reforms have had to be radically recast within a few years of being launched. Reforms of vocational education have had a particularly poor record, falling at the ditch known as 'parity of esteem' as governments have sought to bestow academic equivalence and complex assessment regimes onto vocational learning. The result has been qualifications that lack both the prestige of A-levels and the practical, hands-on learning desired by many young people and employers.

So can the government's vision of a new approach to 'applied learning' – they are at pains not to describe diplomas as 'vocational' qualifications – succeed where other reforms have failed? Well, they are certainly finding the cash to try to ensure success. Education's relatively generous settlement in the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review included an unspecified increase to cover the costs of diplomas. The initial funding premium is worth on average about £1,000 per year for schools for each pupil taking a diploma course.[3] If that premium continues, and if student numbers rise in line with expectations, that will be a very expensive commitment.

Meanwhile, like the parent of an expensive and demanding teenager, the government has been forced to dig deeper for additional funds. Back in January 2008, extra cash was found for consortia to help them strengthen their capacity to deliver diplomas. Then in June that year an extra £81 million was found to train teachers and a further £23 million for pupil transport in rural areas. Mid-July brought a further £60 million to develop exemplar materials.

Ministers are now so committed to the diploma programme that the costs are bound to rise. After all, they have only a short time to get the diplomas sufficiently embedded to make it difficult for a new government to uproot them. Indeed, political uncertainty is one of the big problems with take-up. As head teachers have commented: how can you advise young people to embark on a diploma route when there is no guarantee it will survive a change of government? The Conservatives have said they would scrap the final three diplomas and have hardly been enthusiastic about the others. If they win the next election and need to save money somewhere, the diplomas could be at risk.

Meanwhile, as diploma teaching has become a reality, head teachers have become concerned at their complexity. This is partly the result of the bureaucratic desire to create parity with existing qualifications, something that might have been avoided if the original Tomlinson proposals had been

accepted. So there are three basic levels of diploma – foundation, higher and advanced – each roughly aligned with, respectively, lower level GCSEs, higher level GCSEs, and A-levels.

That much is reasonably straightforward. But there is also now a Progression Diploma, which sits between the higher and advanced diplomas and is worth 2.5 A-levels. Then there is the Extended Diploma, which is available for students wanting more breadth at each of the three original levels. Thus, for example, the Extended Diploma at Advanced Level is worth 4.5 A-levels. Multiply the five different levels by the 17 subject lines and you start to see just how complex the diplomas will be.

The grading system further increases this complexity. The advanced diploma follows the conventional A-level system of grades running from A* down to E. But at the Higher Diploma the grades run only from A* to C and at the Foundation level they run from A* to B. Translating these into points in the school performance league tables will, of course, require even more complex formulae. One really has to wonder whether the diploma had to be made so complex.

Yet there is an even greater challenge: the difficulty of collaborative working between schools and colleges. The specialist nature of the diplomas means that no school is expected to be able to deliver all of them on their own. Yet there will be a national entitlement for all pupils to have access to every one of the 17 diplomas. So schools and colleges have to band together into consortia, with each institution working out with its partners which lines of learning to offer. This has not always proved easy and is a particular issue for independent schools, which are often battling in a competitive market with their state and independent neighbours.

For state schools this collaborative approach is both exciting and alarming. While many head teachers welcome collaboration, they struggle to see how it fits into the competitive market model that has been fostered by successive governments. They are also unclear how this will fit with the current accountability regime of Ofsted inspections and school league tables. If a pupil is enrolled at school A but takes his diploma course at school B, which school gets the points for its league table performance? Similarly, does school B get Ofsted's praise for the student's good behaviour and attendance when he is, in fact, on the roll of school A?

Collaborative working certainly involves some tricky logistical issues. Can different schools' timetables be coordinated to allow pupils to move between them for diploma classes? How much learning time will be lost by pupils moving between institutions, sometimes miles apart? How can teaching standards be maintained across consortia members? These issues can be resolved but they will put an extra strain on school management teams which are already under huge pressures implementing other reforms, such as the changes to GCSEs and A-levels.

The ambition and complexity of the task set for schools by the diploma is illustrated by the problems facing schools in rural areas. To deliver the

entitlement to all 17 diplomas required by 2013, schools will have to collaborate with several different partners. In sparsely populated areas this will mean pupils travelling considerable distances. It is a sign of these difficulties that in 40 of the most rural areas the government has funded the post of Transport and Access Co-ordinators to work out how this can be done. The cost will be £75,000 per local authority for 18 months.[4]

There is also genuine concern that despite their job-related titles, the diplomas are not really vocational at all. Although Tony Blair always described them inside Downing Street as 'vocational diplomas', the government has steadily shifted away from this label. They dropped the first half of the official name of 'specialist diplomas'. Then they insisted the diplomas were not 'vocational' but 'applied' learning'.

The head of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, Dr Ken Boston, has insisted the diplomas are not intended to produce 'job-ready' students, arguing they are about producing young people with core academic skills, flexible soft skills such as problem solving and team-working, as well as some background knowledge of specific employment sectors. Yet this worries many teachers who wonder how well diplomas will motivate non-academic students, particularly those who will soon be required to stay on in education until they are 18. Last summer, Professor Alan Smithers, of Buckingham University, produced a report on diplomas that suggested they were 'a disaster waiting to happen'. He said their purpose is 'confused' as they are 'trying to be all things to all people'.[5]

A recent assessment of the diplomas by Geoff Stanton for the CfBT Education Trust highlighted this lack of practical learning.[6] It noted, for example, that in the seven mandatory units of the diploma in '*construction and the built environment*', only one specifies the use of tools. It argued that the diplomas offered too little to less academic students, exactly the group which is dropping out at 16 now and will be required to stay in education after 2013. The report said that the drive to achieve parity with A-levels, and the excessive focus on the assessment regime, had led to 'specifications that favour abstract rather than practical learning'.

Stanton argues persuasively that the diplomas are in danger of repeating past policy mistakes. These, he says, derive from the fact that reforms of educational provision have been led by qualification reform. The result has been a preoccupation with assessment, rather than with meeting the needs of the learners. This, combined with the search for academic respectability, has led the diplomas down a path that may make them acceptable to universities but which does not greatly appeal to students, particularly those in the lower half of the ability range.

The problem with assessment-led reform is that everything is dominated by the need to prove equivalence. So it is dictated that diplomas must be sufficiently challenging in academic terms to earn parity with GCSEs and A-levels. And there has to be equivalence between the diploma lines of learning, even though – to any outsider – the nature of a diploma in engineering is likely

to be different from one in 'hair and beauty'. Thus the assessment needs become a straitjacket, often squeezing out the more practical needs of the learner.

We have, of course, been down this path before. The 'vocational A-levels', which replaced advanced GNVQs under the Curriculum 2000 reforms, were soon savaged by Ofsted for failing to be 'seriously vocational'. At present, of course, schools and colleges can still offer a range of genuinely vocational qualifications, such as BTECs, City & Guilds, and OCR Nationals. Increasing numbers are applying for these courses, yet their long-term future is now in doubt. Although no final decisions have yet been made, there are fears that funding will be withdrawn for these qualifications as a way of ensuring a wider take-up for diplomas. Or, if they stay, students may have to access them through diplomas, as part of their 'additional specialist learning' component. Yet that would still leave students who want to do something practical having to spend more than half of their time on the more abstract learning in the rest of the diploma.

The government's vision is for all young people to have a choice of three main pathways from the age of 14: GCSEs and A-levels, apprenticeships, and diplomas. They want each pathway to be sufficiently flexible so that students can, if they wish, end up in university by any of these routes. There are signs that the practical, hands-on and job-specific nature of apprenticeships is proving popular with growing numbers of young people who find little satisfaction in GCSEs and A-levels.

But whether there will be success for the 'third-way' approach of the diplomas, which are neither vocational nor purely academic, remains unclear. Indeed, at present, it looks an uphill task. There is still a lack of clarity about just what sort of animal they are meant to be. Diplomas could be the reform that finally ends the English disease of under-valuing applied learning. But they could also be the latest expensive and disruptive failure to reform a secondary school system that has been dominated by the so-called 'gold standard' of A-levels for over 50 years now.

Notes

[1] Parliamentary Written Answers from Schools Minister Jim Knight on 23 October, 27 October and 19 November 2008.

[2] 14-19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform: Final Report of the Working Group on 14-19 Reform. October 2004. http://www.14-19reform.gov.uk

[3] Parliamentary Written Answer from Jim Knight on 27 October 2008.

[4] Parliamentary Written Answer from Sarah McCarthy-Fry on 3 November 2008.

[5] Smithers & Robinson: The Diplomas: a disaster waiting to happen? Centre for Education and Employment Research, University of Buckingham, June 2008. http://www.buckingham.ac.uk/education/research/ceer/pdfs/diploma.pdf

[6] Geoff Stanton: Learning Matters: Making the 14-19 reforms work for learners. CfBT, 2008. http://www.cfbt.com/evidenceforeducation/Default.aspx?page=393

MIKE BAKER is a freelance journalist and broadcaster. He was education correspondent for the BBC from 1989 to 2007. He read English at Cambridge University and has an MA from Kingston University. He is the 2008 CIPR National Education Journalist of the Year. He can be contacted via his website at: www.mikebakereducation.co.uk.