

14-19 Diplomas

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Key Features of 14-19 Diplomas

New 'hybrid' qualifications of general and vocational learning, planned to cover 14 'lines of learning' linked to industry sectors to cover the 14-19 age range. Each qualification comprised of three components: the principal learning component, the generic component and finally the additional or specialist component. The 14-19 Diplomas marked a considerable shift in employer engagement; employers were placed at the heart of their development, were partners from the outset and engaged with the design of the qualification.

Operation date: 2008-2010. It never reached full rollout.

Target population: 14-19 year old learners in England

Purpose: The 14-19 Diplomas focused on combining general and vocational qualifications and were aimed at a range of students; from those considered disaffected or without the required 5 GCSEs at Grade C or above, to higher attaining students wishing to progress into skilled employment or university. The qualifications aimed to "equip young people with the skills employers need and the ability to go on learning throughout their lives" by improving English, Maths and ICT skills and creating qualifications which contained the knowledge and skills needed for employment or higher-level study in a particular sector, thus increasing participation post-16 (Secretary of State for Education and Skills, 2005:3).

Cost: £295.6 million (Isaacs, 2013:282)

Introduction

The 14-19 Diplomas were one of several attempts to develop what are commonly known as 'middle path' qualifications sitting between work-based qualifications such as apprenticeships and academic qualification such as A-levels (Hodgson & Spours, 2007). They were the English government's first real attempt to involve employers in the design of a qualification.

The qualification was considered to be a mechanism to increase post-16 participation to 100% by creating a simplified qualification structure for all post-16 learners that required less assessment and provided more engaging learning experiences (Nuffield 14-19 Review, 2007). However, the Diplomas became decoupled from this strategy - the Education and Skills Act 2008 raised the age of compulsory participation in education or training to the end of the academic year in which young people turn 17 in 2013, to their 18th birthday in 2015, but the Diplomas did not survive.

Context

The development of 14-19 Diplomas were originally triggered by concerns that some exam boards were manipulating grades which raised larger questions regarding whether the existing examination system was fit to measure the ability of students (Smithers, 2002). Mike Tomlinson, former Chief Inspector of Schools at Ofsted, was asked to report to the Department for Education and Skills and recommended a framework to simplify the existing academic and vocational qualifications, thereby also addressing concerns of grade inflation. This report set out six key objectives for a new qualification:

- To raise participation and achievement.
- To ensure that students achieve functional mathematics, literacy and communication and ICT qualifications as these were deemed to be an important element of future success.
- To strengthen vocational routes by improving the quality and status of vocational programmes.
- To ensure a greater breadth and depth of learning to allow employers and universities to differentiate more effectively between top performers.
- To amend assessment practice; reducing the number of times students are examined; increase teacher assessment; and change the assessment of A-levels to improve the quality of teaching and learning.
- To 'rationalise' the 14-19 curriculum and qualifications within a diploma framework, where progression routes and the value of qualifications are clear (Tomlinson, 2004:4).

Instead, the White Paper (Secretary of State for Education and Skills, 2005) which followed the Tomlinson Review chose to focus on the 'middle track' (Hodgson & Spours, 2007) vocational qualifications against the recommendations of the Education and Skills Committee (House of Commons et al., 2007). The move away from wholesale qualification reform as set out by the Tomlinson Report and instead to focus on vocational qualifications is considered to be due to a reticence to challenge the status of GCSEs and A-Levels, a factor that is considered to be one reason why the qualifications ultimately failed (Hodgson & Spours, 2007; House of Commons et al., 2007; Nuffield 14-19 Review, 2007).

The resulting qualification developed was based around 14 'lines of learning', which were developed in three phases. Phase 1 included the initial five 'lines'; Construction & the Built Environment, Creative & Media, Engineering, Information Technology and Society Health & Development. Each line of learning was comprised of three components:

1. The principal learning, a mandatory component which had a strong bearing on the grade awarded and consisted of sector and subject related knowledge. Importantly, this component was considered fundamental to the success of the qualification owing to employer involvement, “employers [were] in the driving seat, so that they will have a key role in determining what the ‘lines of learning’ should be and in deciding in detail what the Diplomas should contain” (Secretary of State for Education and Skills, 2005:47).
2. The generic learning component included functional skills in Maths and English, ICT, a project, ten days of work experience and the inclusion of personal learning and thinking skills. These were “conceived to have wide application and to be developed in a variety of contexts” facilitating progression to higher education or the workplace (Ertl & Hayward, 2010:317). However, only the project ultimately counted towards the final grade awarded creating tensions in the delivery of the qualification, particularly for those students who had completed Maths and English at GCSE but were required to repeat them.
3. The final component – the additional and specialist learning component was designed to facilitate progression, choice, and specialisation.

The complexity within the three components of learning resulted in a difficult to navigate model which required students to clear ten separate ‘hurdles’ before they could claim a qualification. Moreover, whilst the Tomlinson Report (2004) initially envisaged a suite of qualifications running from Entry Level to Level 3 the 14-19 Diplomas eventually only spanned three levels of learning: Level 1, the Foundation Diploma (equivalent to 5 D-G grades GCSE’s), Level 2, the Higher Diploma (equivalent to 7 A* - C GCSEs), and the Level 3 Advanced Diploma (equivalent to 3.5 A-Levels).

Despite considerable investment in the development of the Diplomas the policy came to an end in 2010 at a cost of £295.6m when the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government came to power (Isaacs, 2013; Ertl & Stasz, 2010; Huddleston & Laczik, 2018). Despite employer involvement in the design of the qualifications neither the employers (Ertl & Hayward, 2010), nor the Higher Education community were happy with their content (Senior, 2015). This is partially attributed to the lack of balance between policy makers and employers which occurred despite the understanding that the Diploma Development Partnerships (DDPs), awarding bodies and Qualification and Curriculum Authority (QCA) would work together under a ‘triple lock’ (Ertl & Hayward, 2010:318) which meant that each body needed to agree to the outputs at every stage of development. Employers lack of knowledge of the technicalities of qualification development may well have hindered their contribution to this process (Huddleston & Laczik, 2018). The potential markets lack of understanding of the qualification is a further factor in the demise of the Diploma. Moreover, the qualifications value was not understood by parents who remained unconvinced of its worth (House of Commons et al., 2007; Isaacs, 2013), and this was exacerbated by a lack of good advice and guidance for students (Featherstone et al., 2011).

However, what is largely considered to be the fundamental issue for the 14-16 Diplomas was that the reforms failed to address the dominant position of A-Levels (Hodgson & Spours, 2007; House of Commons et al., 2007; Nuffield 14-19 Review, 2007, leaving the Diploma unable to compete with such a well-tested, well understood and recognised qualification.

Policy Evaluation

The 14-19 Diplomas have been evaluated at several levels from the design process, to the complexity of delivery, the lack of involvement and support of practitioners and the resultant uptake and completion rate. The design of the qualification involving stakeholders involved in the ‘triple lock’ arrangement was evaluated contemporaneously by Ertl et al. (2009). This pointed to issues within the market response to the Diploma, progression to higher education courses, the degree to which quality assurance inhibited the contribution of key partners in the ‘triple lock’ and recommendations for the organisation of the content for future Diplomas.

The complex nature of the qualification was another key issue of the Diplomas raised by evaluations (Ertl et al., 2009; Featherstone et al., 2011; House of Commons et al., 2007; Ofqual, 2011). Delivering a qualification across a consortia of educational institutions was raised at an early stage of the qualification's development (House of Commons et al., 2007) which resulted in IT, administration and transportation issues for the consortia involved in the delivery of the Diplomas (Featherstone et al., 2011). The concerns regarding assessment added to this complexity, notably the challenge of assessing three components of learning in a 'hurdles' based system. This was identified as a barrier to the students' completion of the 14-16 Diplomas (Ertl et al., 2009; Featherstone et al., 2011).

It has been argued that some of these complexities could have been addressed had practitioners been involved earlier in the design of the qualification (Nuffield 14-19 Review, 2007), suggesting they were a significant omission from the Diploma Development Partnerships. A further complication raised by the evaluation of the qualification suggests that although workforce development was initially planned (House of Commons et al., 2007), the training and development of the workforce, particularly of assessors was insufficient (Ofqual, 2011). This situation was further exacerbated when the centrally funded 14-19 workforce support programme was scaled back in 2010 (Featherstone et al., 2011).

The final evaluations focused on the uptake and completion rate of the qualifications. The Labour government of the time requested that the rollout of the Diploma was slow and controlled (House of Commons et al., 2007). However, evaluations of the uptake and completion of the qualification indicated that the qualification attracted only small numbers of students (Ofqual, 2011), mainly choosing the Level 2 equivalent qualification, the Higher Diploma (Department for Children, & Schools and Families, 2008; Featherstone et al., 2011) rather than the Level 3 competitor to the A-Level, the Advanced Diploma. Moreover, results from June 2010 reported that 3069 candidates had successfully completed the requirements of the Level 2 Higher Diploma qualification (Joint Council for Qualifications, 2010), while only 594 had completed the Advanced Diploma with little evidence of candidates performing at the higher grades (Ofqual, 2011).

Conclusion

The clearest relevance of this thirteen-year-old attempt to reform the middle path between general and vocational qualifications is to the recent launch of the T Level. This qualification bears striking similarities with the Diplomas: employers are a key stakeholder in design, they cover similar industry sectors, it looks to reduce the 'pathways' that can be studied, it mandates work experience and looks to challenge the dominance of A-Levels in the post-16 qualification landscape. The introduction of T Levels once again focuses on qualification reform largely in isolation rather than approaching the reform in a holistic, systematic way.

The handling of the introduction of T Levels also raises questions around the narrowing of student choice as the Government is planning on withdrawing funding from BTECs and other vocational qualifications to push for T Level take-up instead. This is problematic, as the T Level does not presently focus on qualifications below Level 3 meaning it will not require the collaboration between schools and colleges mandated by the 14-16 Diplomas, nor do T Levels presently look to engage particularly with disaffected learners, or those who have not yet achieved 5 GCSEs at an appropriate grade. It also does not look to replace GCSEs and A-Levels, which the policy document behind the 14-19 Diplomas, the Tomlinson Report, initially envisaged (Senior, 2015).

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