

THE DIPLOMA A Disaster Waiting to Happen?

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Preface

Britain stands on the brink of a massive upheaval in school qualifications. Although the government has yet to declare its hand, it seems clear that the intention is to replace A-levels, GCSEs, BTECs and other qualifications with just one award, the Diploma.

Why should it be doing this? There is no doubt that vocational education is a mess and A-levels are not distinguishing as well as they should. But these weaknesses do not of themselves imply that everything has to be thrown into the melting point. It would be much simpler to repair A-levels and put in place good routes from school to work. Indeed the original plan was to let employers devise 14 vocational diplomas, but this has morphed into a qualification, the Diploma, which seeks to be all things to all people.

In this report we examine what the policy hopes to achieve, look in detail at three of the first diploma strands, and analyse the views of awarding bodies, teachers, schools and colleges, and employers and universities. We consider both the thinking behind the proposed changes and the practicalities of implementation. And, crucially, we ask: is there a better way forward?

The government has described the first wave of diplomas as pilots. But it does not give the impression that this is an open experiment. It has instituted a tight programme to roll out the diploma system by 2011 and hold a review in 2013. It is heavily promoting the Diploma using its position as a monopoly customer of education services. We challenge the present government, and the next, to run a fair market test to see what qualifications actually serve the needs of pupils, parents, schools, employers, and universities.

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June 2008

Executive Summary

England stands on the brink of a massive upheaval in school qualifications. The original plan was to let employers devise 14 vocational diplomas to meet their needs, but this has morphed into a qualification, the Diploma, to be all things to all people. Although the government has not declared its hand, it seems clear that it is attracted by the idea of an overarching award for 14 to 18 year-olds.

The Centre for Education and Employment Research at the University of Buckingham has been commissioned by the Gatsby Charitable Foundation to make an independent assessment of the soundness of the ideas, the implications and the early stages of implementation.

This report is based on an analysis of the conceptual basis and practical realisation; a detailed study of three of the diplomas - engineering, creative and media and ICT - to be taught from September 2008; and the views of the awarding bodies, teachers, schools and colleges, and employers and universities. It also asks whether there is a better way forward and makes twelve recommendations.

A number of common threads emerged in the different strands of the research.

- Preparation - having to rush to get together the teaching materials and train the teachers.
- Logistics - will it be feasible to run 17 lines across a variety of settings involving potentially large numbers of young people moving around cities and the countryside, and will schools and colleges in competition for students and funding be able to co-operate successfully?
- Employment placements - will there be enough to go round and will small and medium sized employers particularly, want to be involved if there are onerous CRB checks?
- Recognition - how will diplomas/the Diploma be regarded by employers and universities?
- Structure - what, for example, is to be the role of Level 1 diplomas, as a taster or a means of engaging the disaffected?

Parents and pupils appear to share the concerns. Only about half the 38,000 places originally allocated for 2008 have been taken up.

While the research has uncovered particular practical difficulties, more fundamentally it finds the basic concept flawed. All of the government's three main arguments for the Diploma are contestable.

- The Diploma will not solve the problems with existing qualifications, but will bring a number of its own stemming from seeking to specify across a wide range aims, subjects skills, intricate combination and grading rules, and the insistence on compulsory elements. The central core of 'generic components' - functional skills; the project; work experience; and personal, learning and thinking skills - is shown to be of questionable value.

- A common qualification of itself will not bring ‘parity of esteem’ - the value of a qualification resides not in whether it is academic or vocational but in what you can do with it.
- Centrally imposing the Diploma, and compulsory education and training to age 18, take away an essential test of quality - that courses and qualifications are freely chosen.

Three major weaknesses are identified.

- It is not clear what the Diploma is supposed to qualify for. It is extremely doubtful whether the same qualification can be fit for a wide range of purposes such as university entrance and recruitment to craft and technician levels in employment.
- The Diploma is to be mainly internally assessed so it will be difficult to ensure comparability of standards in the same subject let alone between them. Access to universities and employment will inevitably be less fair. The annual cries about A-level standards will be as nothing compared to the uproar the Diploma will provoke.
- Most schools have neither the range of equipment nor expertise to teach practical skills to industrial standards so the danger is that the Diploma will become less about honing up practical skills than writing or talking about them.

There is no doubt that qualifications for 14 to 18 year-olds have to be improved but it is shown that an array of qualifications corresponds more closely than one award with the role of education and training at the interfaces between school, university and work.

If education means anything at all, by upper secondary schooling young people will have a much clearer idea of their interests, abilities and aspirations. They will be wanting to go in different directions. Qualifications that serve those directions in their own terms are needed rather than a Procrustean framework.

There are already good academic pathways which can be developed. A-levels derive directly from university entrance examinations and have generally served as a reliable currency between schools and universities. The fact that universities are increasingly re-introducing their own entrance tests indicates that all is not well at present. This is best tackled by improving A-levels so that they distinguish better rather than jettisoning them.

England does not, however, have good routes from school to work. The key is qualifications that employers really want and will recruit on. The failure of the centrally devised GNVQs is a warning that schemes may look good on paper but have no life in them. By putting employers in the driving seat the vocational diplomas as originally proposed offered real hope of filling a huge gap in the qualifications structure, but the specificity is being lost as the emphasis shifts to a grand design for everyone and everything.

The report makes twelve recommendations pointing to a better way forward. It challenges the government to run a fair trial to discover what qualifications universities, employers, schools, parents and pupils really want rather than seeming to push a predetermined outcome.

Recommendations

1. *That* the government should consider the advantages of an array of qualifications for upper secondary schooling responding to different needs and not to seek to force everything into a common framework.
2. *That* the government should ask itself whether the apparent benefits of a common shape and the unifying threads of the Diploma - functional skills; the project; work experience; and personal, learning and thinking skills - outweigh the losses involved in overturning the accumulated experience of a century.
3. *That* it is important to recognise that academic and vocational learning have different organising principles, which are best served by different types of qualification.
4. *That* it is important to recognise the distinction between qualifications and skills: qualifications do not necessarily guarantee skills and people can be highly skilled without having formal qualifications.
5. *That* A-levels are not working as well as they should at present but this is better remedied by building on what is there rather than throwing everything into the melting pot.
6. *That* the Diploma does little to deal with existing weaknesses in qualifications for the 14-19 age range, but brings significant problems of its own to do with specifying, combining and assessing.
7. *That* the government should recognise that internal assessment is not sufficiently robust to withstand the pressures of competitive university entrance and employment recruitment.
8. *That* the lessons should be learned from the failure of GNVQs and the lack of take-up of NVQs as centrally devised matrices that led to qualifications being developed which did not correspond with actual employer needs.
9. *That* the emphasis should return to developing vocational diplomas as routes into employment. By putting employers in the driving seat the vocational diplomas as originally proposed offered real hope of filling a huge gap in the qualifications structure, but this is being put at risk as the emphasis shifts from the development of qualifications for specific purposes to bringing in a grand design to include everyone and everything.
10. *That* the purpose of diplomas be clarified by distinguishing between qualifications designed so as not to close off opportunities for university entrance from those designed to facilitate university entrance.
11. *That* the government should come clean on whether the intention is to introduce diplomas or the Diploma; are diplomas to be qualifications alongside existing qualifications or are they and existing qualifications to be subsumed into the one Diploma?
12. *That* the government allow a fair market test to discover what qualifications universities, employers, parents, schools and pupils really want rather than pushing the Diploma to the point that it seems that it has already decided on the outcome of the 2013 review.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 On 23 October 2007, Ed Balls, Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families announced in a speech to the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) in London that three new school diplomas would be developed – in science, languages and humanities (DCSF, 2007b). This signalled a significant departure from the previous government's conception of diplomas as practical programmes. All the 14 diplomas planned to come on stream from 2008 to 2010 are vocational 'lines', designed to run alongside academic qualifications like GCSEs and A-levels. The ostensible reason for the planting of diplomas on academic territory was to overcome an academic/vocational divide which, it is held, leads to practical learning being treated as second best. But it is such a profound change of direction that one cannot help wondering whether there is more to it.
- 1.2 In his CBI speech, the Secretary of State also deferred a review of A-levels due to take place in 2008 until 2013 so that they could be considered at the same time as diplomas. In doing so he seemed to be opening the way for diplomas to replace A-levels. He said it was not for the government to prejudge, but "if Diplomas are successfully introduced and are delivering the mix that employers and universities value, they could become the qualification of choice for young people." The insistence on the capital 'D' is in itself telling. Increasingly, the new qualifications are being officially presented as 'the Diploma' rather than 'diplomas'. The latest rule book from the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (2008a), for example, is entitled *The Diploma: an overview of the qualification*. It begins: "As part of the 14-19 reform programme, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), the Skills for Business Network (SfBN) and awarding bodies are developing a new qualification - the Diploma."

Origins

- 1.3 The Diploma has its origins in a kite first flown when Estelle Morris was Secretary of State. In a Green Paper, *14-19: Extending Opportunities, Raising Standards*, published in February 2002, she indicated her intention to introduce a matriculation diploma giving equal weight to academic and vocational studies (DfES, 2002). But the troubled introduction of the Curriculum 2000 A-level reforms and the Secretary of State's resignation led to the idea being shelved (Smithers, 2005). It was not taken forward again until 2003 when Charles Clarke, as Education Secretary, commissioned Mike Tomlinson, on the strength of his reports which helped to calm the A-level storm, to review 14-19 qualifications as a whole. Tomlinson's remit was to make recommendations on a 'unified framework of qualifications', which he interpreted as an integrated diploma. He pursued this aim assiduously through a progress report, an interim report and a final report, all the while gathering momentum among the educational establishment for the replacement of GCSEs and A-levels by an overarching diploma.
- 1.4 Tony Blair, the Prime Minister, a strong supporter of A-levels, became concerned and asked his then Schools Minister, David Miliband, if GCSEs and A-levels were safe with Tomlinson. He was assured they were. But these were weasel words, since while Tomlinson was proposing to retain the content of GCSEs and A-levels he was recommending that the qualifications themselves would disappear, into the

Diploma. The final report was delivered in October 2004 (DfES, 2004). Charles Clarke and David Miliband, both reputedly sympathetic to its content, were there to receive it, but both had moved on before they could officially respond. It fell to Ruth Kelly, the new Secretary of State, to publish the Blair government's considered view in February 2005 as a White Paper, *14-19 Education and Skills*. This rejected Tomlinson's central recommendation of an all-embracing diploma framework in favour of retaining and improving A-levels and GCSEs, and improving practical education by introducing vocational diplomas (DfES, 2005).

- 1.5 On vocational education it said: "We will introduce the diplomas in 14 lines and make these a national entitlement by 2015. The first four diplomas in information and communications technology, engineering, health and social care and creative and media will be available in 2008. Eight will be available by 2010" (DfES, 2005, page 6). "Crucially, we intend to put employers in the driving seat so 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. That is essential because these qualifications will only have real value to young people if they are valued by employers. We will, therefore, put the Sector Skills Councils in the lead" (DfES 2005, page 47).

Confusion of Purpose

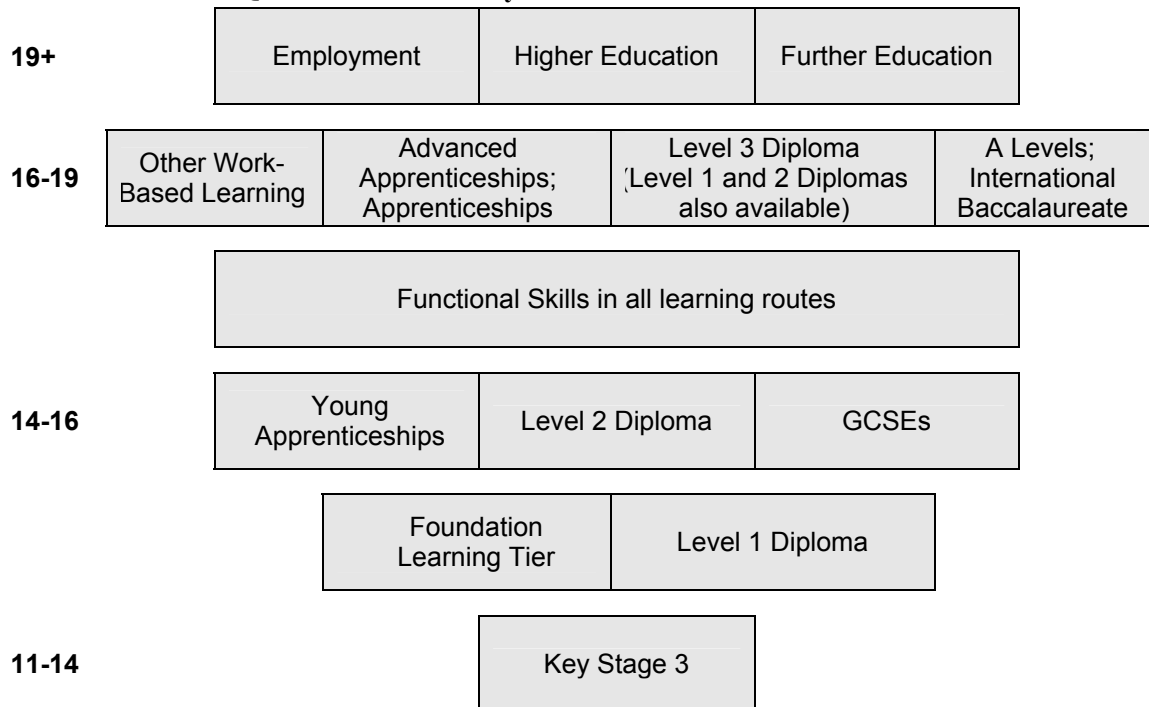
- 1.6 There is, however, ambiguity. The government was not content for these qualifications to be designed with the specific aim of preparing young people for particular fields of employment. It saw the risk that as such they could become cul-de-sacs and it wanted to be sure that the diplomas would also open the way to university. "HE institutions will also have an important role, because we need to be absolutely confident that a specialised level 3 Diploma can be a good route to higher education. If high achieving young people can gain access to the university of their choice by doing well in a Level 3 Diploma, then once again, that will contribute to making the diplomas a valued choice." (DfES 2005, page 47). But the emphasis has shifted from avoiding diplomas becoming a dead-end to positively promoting them as a route into higher education. This is reflected in the names adopted by ministers. They were first called 'specialised vocational diplomas' (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2007), then 'specialised diplomas' until the publication in March 2007 of the Green Paper, *Raising Expectations*, when the 'specialised' part of the name was dropped and all references are to 'Diplomas' only.
- 1.7 The National Association of Headteachers (Education and Skills Committee, 2007, page 9) has pointed to other aspects of the confusion surrounding diplomas. "It is unreasonable to expect the same qualification to address, simultaneously, issues of parity of esteem for vocational and academic routes, university discrimination and disaffected young people. In an attempt to obtain the official view of what diplomas are for, the Committee asked a number of witnesses including the then Secretary of State, Alan Johnson, the Minister for Schools, Jim Knight, the Director of DfES 14-19 Reform, Jon Coles, and the Chief Executive of the QCA, Ken Boston, and got a variety of replies some of which it found opaque. It reached the conclusion that "it is far from clear that those in charge of developing the different diplomas share a common understanding of the kinds of learning they will demand and the purposes they will serve." It went on: "We welcome the introduction of more practical

learning into the curriculum but there is a risk that the pressure over time will be to introduce more and more desk-based, theoretical material into practical vocational curricula in pursuit of parity with academic qualifications” (Education and Skills Committee, 2007, page 15).

Raising the Participation Age

1.8 On of the reasons for the attempt to turn the proposed vocational diplomas into a more general qualification is likely to have been the government’s desire for an award structure to underpin its plan to extend compulsory educations. In a speech to the Labour Party Conference in 2006, Gordon Brown had said he wanted all young people to remain in education and/or training to the age of 18 (Smithers, 2007, page 376). The proposal was fleshed out in a Green Paper, *Raising Expectations*, issued in March 2007. It stated that “in order to count as participating, young people would be required to work towards accredited qualifications” (DfES, 2007, page 6). It envisaged (page 24) the array of qualification pathways reproduced in Chart 1.1. It is clear that at the time diplomas were seen as occupying the middle ground between GCSEs and A-levels, on the one hand, and apprenticeships and other work-based learning on the other. But the diplomas were regarded as an important element in the strategy because: “We judge that the best moment to raise the participation age to 17 would be 2013. This is the first year in which we will have in place a national entitlement to the new qualification we plan to introduce” (Page 6).

Chart 1.1: Future Qualification Pathways



1.9 When Tony Blair stepped down, education 14-19 was left as unfinished business. He was succeeded on 27 June 2007 by Gordon Brown. On 28 June, Brown announced his new Cabinet. He had split the former Department for Education and Skills into a Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) with responsibility for education to age 18 and a Department for Innovation, Universities and Science (DIUS) for education post-18. To the DCSF he appointed as Secretary

of State, Ed Balls, who had been his right hand person since 1994 when Brown had been Shadow Chancellor. Ed Balls' speciality is economics. From being a personal adviser to Brown he became in turn Chief Economic Adviser to the Treasury and then having been elected to Parliament in 2005, Economic Secretary to the Treasury.

- 1.10 Balls concentrated on driving through the Brown agenda. Raising the participation age became the top priority. An Education and Skills Bill occupied pride of place in the Queen's Speech on 6 November 2007. This includes a duty on young people to participate and a duty on parents to assist their children to participate. By 2013 all pupils will have to stay in education or training to the end of the school year in which they turn 17, and this will be raised to 18 in 2015.
- 1.11 An Education and Skills Bill was duly published and received its initial reading on 28 November 2007. In introducing the second reading on 14 January 2008, the Secretary of State claimed: "The Education and Skills Bill is a landmark piece of legislation - the biggest reform in educational participation for more than 50 years." In explaining the reasons for it he said: "Raising the education participation age is not just about economic strength; it is about social justice" (Balls, 2008). Significantly there was no mention of the role of education and training in enhancing people's lives. The Bill has since been in Committee.

Recent Developments

- 1.12 The Brown government's thinking on diplomas or the Diploma has also continued to evolve. There were further signs that it is increasingly being seen as an all-embracing framework rather than an attempt to put in place some good ladders from school to work. Tomlinson was a frequent visitor to the DCSF during summer 2007 and has been playing a prominent part in presentations. The government has also announced proposals for a new extended diploma to be available from 2011. In a speech to the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) in Brighton on 7 March, the Secretary of State (DCSF, 2008a) said, the extended diploma "will be designed to extend each of the 17 Diploma lines, across all levels." "It could appeal to those teenagers who currently study at least 4 A Levels, as well as to students at the Foundation and Higher stage." Again this seems to betray hurried thinking. While a case could be made out for a level above advanced, it is less clear how the notion of an extension fits in with the foundation and higher levels - how is an extended foundation level going to differ from a higher level for example?

This Report

- 1.13 In the following chapters we describe the planned structure for the Diploma and its current state of implementation, present a quantitative picture and offer a critical analysis. Our critique is at two levels. First, we consider diplomas as individual qualifications. Secondly, and more fundamentally, we look at the Diploma as a system designed not just to add to existing qualifications but to replace or swallow them.

2. Structure and Development

2.1 What are diplomas, or should we say what is the Diploma? It has been a fast-changing scene. The present snapshot we offer (in May 2008) is based mainly on the version (Version 3) as described in the latest statement from the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (2008a) *The Diploma: an overview of the qualification*. Diplomas are to have a common structure across areas of learning called ‘lines’. Chart 2.1 lists the 17 lines presently planned and gives the dates they are expected to come on stream. The first 14 were originally called vocational diplomas and they are mainly in the fields for which 14 general national vocational qualifications (GNVQs) were introduced from 1992. Of the first 14 diplomas, 11 have a direct GNVQ equivalent. The only exceptions are the absence of art and design, management studies, and performing arts (which has been incorporated into creative and media) which were in the GNVQ portfolio. The number is brought back up to 14 by the addition of hair and beauty and public services, and the splitting of leisure and tourism into two.

Chart 2.1: Diploma ‘Lines’

Area	First Teaching
Information Technology	
Society, Health and Development	
Engineering	September 2008
Creative and Media	
Construction & the Built Environment	
Environmental and Land-Based Studies	
Manufacturing & Product Design	
Hair and Beauty Studies	September 2009
Business, Administration and Finance	
Hospitality	
Public Services	
Sport and Leisure	
Retail	September 2010
Travel & Tourism	
Science	
Languages	September 2011
Humanities	

2.2 To the original 14 vocational lines the Brown government added three which are academic sounding - science, languages and humanities. It is early days yet and it is not clear what their purpose is to be. The proposal for a science diploma could be recognition of the need to train science technicians for, say, the pharmaceutical industry; or it could be aimed at parity of esteem; or it could be a step towards an overarching framework. Whatever the intentions the omens from previous experience with GNVQs are not good. There was a science GNVQ which was

intended to replace the BTEC qualification for training science technicians. But it was taken over by educationists who believed in integrated science (they had just lost the battle over GCSE science which became a combination of biology chemistry and physics rather than as they had hoped just the one subject with the individual sciences wrapped up together). As a result a vocational pathway became academicized and it satisfied no one, it was neither a route to university nor into employment and take-up barely scratched the existing A-levels or BTECs.

- 2.3 In fact GNVQs were generally held not to be a success and were phased out from September 2000, to be replaced at advanced level by vocational A-levels, which themselves are to be discontinued. The diplomas are thus qualifications seeking to emerge phoenix like from the ashes of past failures. The academic diplomas will present a particular challenge.

Levels

- 2.4 Like GNVQs, the new diplomas are to be mainly at three levels deemed to be equivalent to A-levels (Level 3), five good GCSEs (Level 2) and other GCSE grades (Level 1). In GNVQs they were called advanced, intermediate and foundation; in the new diplomas they are to be advanced, higher and foundation. For school league tables and university admissions, advanced diplomas are to count as the equivalent of 3.5 A-levels, higher diplomas as 7 GCSEs at grades A*-C, and foundation diplomas as 5 GCSEs at Grades D-G (QCA 2008b).
- 2.5 Diploma levels are also to be nuanced by the award of progression and extended diplomas. The progression diploma is intended to be broadly equivalent to 2 A-levels (later revised upwards to 2.5) and aimed at those who cannot complete a whole advanced diploma (BBC News, 2007b). The progression diploma will be essentially the advanced diploma without the additional and specialised learning. Extended diplomas to be available from 2011 are expected to be equivalent to 4.5 A-levels at the advanced level, 9 GCSEs at the higher level and 7 GCSEs at the foundation level (DCSF, 2008a). There is a suspicion of over-weighting here, perhaps to enhance the appeal of diplomas to schools concerned about their league table positions.

Shape

- 2.6 The basic unit of the diplomas is the Guided Learning Hour (GLH), which is ‘the number of hours of teacher-supervised or directed study time assigned to complete the qualification or a unit of a qualification.’ (QCA, 2008a) Chart 2.2 shows how they are apportioned across the levels and areas of learning.

Chart 2.2: Guided Learning Hours

Level	Generic Learning	Principal Learning	Additional and Specialist Learning
1. Foundation	240	240	120
2. Higher	200	420	180
3 Advanced	180	540	360

Generic Learning

- 2.7 The unifying thread of diplomas and what they would add to A-levels and GCSEs if they were to replace them is what has been termed ‘generic learning’. It consists of:
- functional skills in English, mathematics and information and communication technology;
 - personal, learning and thinking skills;
 - a project;
 - 10 days work experience or work-related learning.
- 2.8 The functional skills are currently being developed as free-standing qualifications that are separately assessed. The personal, learning and thinking skills - independent inquiry, creative thinking, reflective learning, team working, self-management and effective participation - are not to be taught and assessed separately but through the other components. The project will be locally assessed and moderated and will contribute to the overall diploma grade. Each learner at each level of diplomas has to do at least ten days work experience, but it will not be assessed.

Principal Learning

- 2.9 Principal learning is the distinctive part of the diploma line. As Chart 2.2 shows it is slated to be half an advanced diploma, somewhat more of a higher diploma and somewhat less of a foundation diploma. At least half the principal learning must be devoted to applied learning in the sense of being relevant to the workplace. Principal learning is to be assembled out of units of assessment that are accredited for each diploma and which may be 30 or 60 GLH at Levels 1 and 2 and, additionally, 90 GLH at Level 3.

Additional and Specialist Learning

- 2.10 A third strand to diplomas is ‘additional and specialist learning’ which is intended to allow specialisation and/or complementary learning. It will consist of qualifications chosen by the learner, or on behalf of the learner, from the official catalogue.

Assessment

- 2.11 The Diploma is to be graded with Level 1 reported as A*, A and B, Level 2 as A*, A, B, and C, and Level 3 as A*, A, B, C, D and E, with in each case also an unclassified category U. The grades will be derived from the aggregate score of the principal learning and the project. In addition, to receive the award all the components including the functional skills and additional and specialist learning will have had to be passed (QCA 2007b). Nevertheless, on the grounds that providers and candidates are more likely to pay more attention to what counts in the final award, the principal learning and the project are likely to be regarded as more important. This will throw a lot of weight on to the project and the extent to which it can be regarded as the student’s own work. For the advanced diploma the project is allocated about a fifth of the time of principal learning (120 hours against 540).
- 2.12 Assessment will mainly be internal though with checks through moderation (applying standards across assessors, centres and over time) and verification (local

checking of processes and decisions). Even so, it will be hard to ensure that the project is the learners' own work as has been found in the assessment of course for the GCSE. There will also be external assessment at the advanced level but the proportion and approach will vary across the lines of learning though it is not expected to be more than 15 per cent. As well as the grading based on the specialised learning and the project, the details of achievement are to be recorded in a transcript including in addition passes in functional learning, personal, learning and skills, work experience, and additional and specialist learning.

Development

- 2.13 The construction of a diploma is an elaborate process involving a number of players including Diploma Development Partnerships, QCA and awarding bodies, the Diploma Gateway and Development Consortia.

Diploma Development Partnerships

- 2.14 Diploma Development Partnerships (DDPs) have been established for each of the first 14 diplomas to determine the skills, knowledge and understanding that they should cover. The intention is that they should be employer-led so the DDPs are co-ordinated by the relevant Sector Skills Councils (SSC). Several skills councils could be involved with the one diploma and it has not always been an easy relationship. In the case of engineering, for example, six SSCs have been involved. The DDPs also typically include representatives of schools, colleges, higher education, professional bodies and awarding bodies.
- 2.15 The government has also announced the chairmen of the Development Partnerships for science, humanities and languages (DCSF, 2008b). They are all from the world of academe, but they will work to achieve a similar structure to the other diplomas, which may prove difficult since academic and vocational learning have different organising principles. We develop this point in Chapter 6.

QCA and Awarding Bodies

- 2.16 Once a DDP has set out its requirements, the QCA becomes responsible for translating these into criteria. The QCA also formally recognises awarding bodies to develop modules and full diploma qualifications for endorsement by DDPs and, subsequently, accreditation by QCA. The QCA, through its National Assessment Agency (NAA), is intended to be responsible for aggregating and recording the diploma results (Commons Education and Skills Committee (2007, Ev 53). Subsequently, QCA has been split into a development body and a test and exams regulatory body, but the former still to be called the QCA is to retain the NAA (DCSF, 2007a).

Diploma Gateway and Consortia

- 2.17 The content of diplomas is to be assembled by consortia of schools, colleges and training providers. The consortia to deliver the first wave of diplomas in September 2008 was decided by a bidding process in which proposals were put before Gateway Panels convened on a regional basis and consisting of representatives of Government Offices, Learning and Skills Councils (which have subsequently been disbanded) and DDPs.

3. Implementation

3.1 How is it all working out in practice? The groups selected to stage the first diplomas in September 2008 came through a rigorous process in which they were assessed by expert panels. The consortia had to demonstrate their readiness in terms of five criteria: collaboration; facilities; workforce; information, advice and guidance; and employer engagement.

3.2 Altogether 361 consortia applied consisting typically of 6-12 organisations. The consortia were based on schools but usually included at least one further education college and sometimes a university, the local authority, the careers service and employers. The applications were placed in one of four categories recommending:

- to go through for 2008 delivery with no conditions;
- to go through for delivery from September 2008 with conditions that will need to be met within three months;
- not ready for September 2008 but with conditions which, if met, would mean they would be ready for September 2009;
- will need to re-apply for a subsequent round (in other words rejected).

Altogether, it was envisaged that 145 consortia in 97 local authorities would provide diplomas in 2008. Chart 3.1 shows the outcome of the process by diploma field. Each consortium was able to apply to provide some or all of the diplomas. Ten were approved to deliver all five lines.

Chart 3.1: Consortia Applications and Outcomes for 2008

Diploma	Accepted for 2008	Accepted for 2008 with Conditions	Accepted for 2009	Need to Re-apply	Total	% Selected
IT	18	27	51	135	231	19.5
Society, Health and Development	16	23	50	143	232	16.8
Engineering	45	15	58	70	188	31.9
Creative and Media	34	28	100	100	262	23.7
Construction & the Built Environment	27	17	64	105	213	20.7

Source: Gateway 1 Results, www.dcsf.gov.uk/14-19/index. (accessed 17 November 2007).

2.18 The acceptance rate ranged from 16.8 per cent in society, health and development to 31.9 per cent in engineering. The 145 consortia bid to offer, as Chart 3.2 shows, 38,011 places in total. Of these 30.9 per cent were at foundation level, 43.8 per cent at higher level and 25.4 per cent at advanced level. Comparing Charts 3.1 and 3.2 reveals that although the highest number of approved consortia was in engineering (32.1 per cent) most places were on offer in creative and media (30.0 per cent). The lowest numbers were in society, health and development for consortia (11.4 per cent) and construction and the built environment for places (13.2 per cent). In the event only about half the available places have been taken up (BBC News, 2008a). The Secretary of State said: “We decided the right thing to do was to make sure we

put quality first, that we move forward with schools and colleges who were really confident in the first year that they were ready. Any school or college who said they needed more time, we said ‘that’s fine by us’”.

Chart 3.2: Projected Places for September 2008

Diploma	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Total
IT	2,518	3,620	1,743	7,881
Society, Health and Development	1,860	3,038	1,929	6,827
Engineering	2,338	3,010	1,539	6,887
Creative and Media	3,094	4,936	3,379	11,409
Construction & the Built Environment	1,928	2,026	1,053	5,007
Total	11,738	16,630	9,643	38,011

Source: Gateway 1 Results, www.dcsf.gov.uk/14-19/index

- 3.3 Although the government has been keen to stress that teaching for the diplomas will involve about two-thirds of local authorities in September 2008, in fact the numbers of students involved is very small, only about 0.5 per cent of the cohort. The first students taking diplomas will therefore be a small select band of guinea pigs. Fears have been expressed by Jerry Jarvis, the managing director of Edexcel, one of the leading awarding bodies for diplomas, that they could be left with “worthless” qualifications (Curtis, 2008b).

The New Diplomas in Practice

- 3.4 In order to see how the new diplomas were faring in practice we looked in detail at three of the first five to come on stream - engineering, creative and media, and information and communications technology.

Engineering

- 3.5 The Diploma Development Partnership for engineering has involved six Sector Skills Councils - Automotive Skills (car retail), Cogent (petroleum, chemical, polymer, nuclear), Energy and Utility Skills (electricity, gas, water, waste) GoSkills (passenger transport), SEMTA (science, engineering and manufacturing) and SummitSkills (building services). Initially, each was keen to ensure that its patch was well represented and insisted on at least one unit devoted to the particular interest. One developer called this “deadly and meaningless”, and it was something of a struggle to get the DDP to agree cross-cutting themes.
- 3.6 The engineering diploma is being driven forward by the Royal Academy of Engineering (RAEng) which sees it as a golden opportunity to establish engineering as a mainstream subject in schools. Attempts to do so in the past have foundered. An A-level available in the 1970s and 80s only ever attracted around 200 candidates a year and at most 40 schools (JMB, 1972-86; Heywood, Carter and Kelly, 2007). Schools tended to take the view that A-level physics was more highly regarded and flexible, even though engineering science was as, if not more, difficult. But the RAEng believes that the diploma will be more popular because the levels will build on each other.

- 3.7 The RAEng is involved both nationally and locally. Nationally, it is developing a specialist maths unit to be of appeal to the leading universities. The University of Cambridge has said that from what it has seen it will be more relevant than A-level maths, but Imperial College, London is sticking to its preference for A-level physics and maths. The specialist maths unit (60 GLH) will be externally examined, but as things stand it will not contribute to the grading of the diploma. The RAEng believes that the extra maths is essential to keep open the prospect of going to the leading universities, and without it the diploma will not appeal to parents. But employers are tending to see it as a qualification in its own right on which they can recruit to train for specific roles. Within the diploma we may, therefore, see a two tier structure with some students taking high level maths and others not.
- 3.8 Locally, the Royal Academy is chairing one of the consortia. It is in London and consists of seven 11-16 schools, two FE colleges and a university. It was allocated 504 places for September 2008, 206 at Level 1, 220 at Level 2 and 78 at Level 3. Some tension has arisen over the purpose of Level 1. Some schools with high ability children see it as a taster that can be slotted in alongside the regular GCSEs, while others want to use it as a way of keeping potential dropouts engaged for longer. It is difficult to see how the two groups can be taught alongside each other.
- 3.9 The consortium has encountered a number of practical difficulties. The schools have found it difficult to agree on common timetabling. At least in the early stages it is intended that it will be the teachers who move around, but students, on occasions, will also have to travel from setting to setting. Money is attached to pupils and headteachers are reluctant to give up part of their budgets. The schools have tended to see engineering as similar to design & technology and have tended to put D&T teachers in charge, whereas it is maths and science teachers who are needed. Many of these difficulties are being ironed out by patient negotiation. It has been a rush to get the curriculum materials together. Learning materials are having to be drawn in and adapted from wherever they can be found. The plan in this consortium is for the FE colleges to provide much of the principal learning with their lecturers in the main going from school to school. The specialist unit in maths will be taught mainly by lecturers from the university.
- 3.10 In order to get a different perspective, we looked in detail at another consortium offering engineering, this time in the north of England. It bid for 65 places, 15 at Level 1, 30 at Level 2 and 20 at Level 3, but reckons it may have been too modest since it has had 50 expressions of interest for the Level 3 places. These, at present, are based in just one school in partnership with a university. The advanced diploma is being treated as a development of existing collaboration between the schools and the university in the teaching of maths, physics and design and technology A-levels. Maths for the students wishing to go on to university will continue to be delivered through the maths A-level. The Level 1 and 2 diplomas also build on existing provision since the local authority is already geared up for about a third of pupils being 'off-site' with all that entails. There will be two diploma days, one spent at an engineering centre and the other in a particular school in the area. The other three days will be spent in the home school with the rest of the pupils on core GCSEs.

- 3.11 There was confidence that the engineering diploma would be a success at Levels 2 and 3, but there were doubts about Level 1 which had little appeal for employers. Its future might be as a taster in Year 9. While there is a clear rationale for the engineering diploma, doubts were expressed about other diplomas, creative and media, and health and beauty, for example, on the grounds they appear to be out of line with both students' expectations and employment prospects. There was concern in the consortium about the provision for staff training. Three days was not long enough and the national provision inadequate so the local authority had devised its own training. It felt that teaching 14-16 year-olds and 16-18 year-olds was different and not the same as tended to be assumed. It was disappointed too at the lack of support (there was no specialist school in the consortium and the adviser provided through the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust was in a city 40 miles away). It would also have welcomed some forum in which consortia could exchange ideas.
- 3.12 Engineering is a broad term with the particular fields of employment being very different across the country. In London it is mainly transport, motor maintenance and repair, electronics, building services and food with differences between north and south of the river. In the north of England there is still some heavy industry but it takes only a fraction of the workforce. The demand in engineering is in such fields as materials and composites, medical and sports engineering (knee and hip joints), CAD electronics, and aerospace coming mainly from numerous small and medium-sized enterprises. It has been calculated that in the consortium's city and surrounding area there is a shortage of some 6,000 Level 3 engineers. Conversely, in some parts of the country there is no engineering industry (some of the south coast, for example) and it is difficult to see how there can be a universal entitlement to the engineering diploma including work experience and applied learning. The consortium has found that employers generally say they welcome the new qualification, but most are adopting a 'wait and see' attitude before fully committing themselves.

Creative and Media

- 3.13 The creative and media diploma offers a bewildering array of choice to students, and poses potentially some of the most difficult organisational challenges of any of the new courses for schools and colleges. But it also may be one of the easiest "sells" to teenagers. The diploma has been developed by three Sector Skills Councils – Skillset, the SSC for the audiovisual industries, in partnership with Skillsfast UK, the SSC for 'apparel, footwear, and textiles' and the Creative and Cultural Industries SSC.
- 3.14 Chart 3.3 gives a flavour of its breadth. Study in some 20 employment fields is being made available, embracing among others fashion and footwear design, advertising, drama, film, TV, radio, computer games, and creative writing. Intriguingly, old-fashioned craft skills such as woodwork, metalwork and ceramics also feature. Students at Level 2 must choose a minimum of six of these areas to study; Level 3 candidates must opt for at least four. At all three levels, the diplomas are to be studied through four themes: 'creativity in context' (understanding the background to the creative business); 'thinking and working creatively' (nurturing creative thinking); 'principles, processes and practice' (developing practical skills); and 'creative business and enterprise' (business skills).

Chart 3.3: Creative and Media Options

2D Visual Art	Creative Writing	Interactive Media
3D Visual Art	Dance	Music
Advertising	Drama	Photo Imaging
Animation	Fashion	Product Design
Audio and Radio	Film	Television
Computer Games	Footwear	Textiles
Craft	Graphic Design	Printing and Publishing ¹

1. Available from 2009.

- 3.15 The courses are designed to be highly practical, and assessed almost entirely through coursework. Among the compulsory tasks set for students at the higher and advanced levels are taking part in an arts production, making research presentations, helping to organise a festival, creating a business plan and making a sales pitch to an audience. Typically, the student will carry out research and then produce something practical.
- 3.16 The amount of choice is staggering: there are 49 specialist options for the advanced diploma; 83 at higher and 80 at foundation. This flexibility, and the attraction of students to fields such as the media, computer games and advertising, may explain why creative and media is predicted to be by far the most popular of the first five diplomas: the diploma consortia forecast a total take-up of 11,409 students from 2008. One local authority official, who is in contact with hundreds of schools in the IT field, said creative and media would be more attractive to pupils than the IT diploma. The head of one partnership which is offering creative and media courses said, however, that it would be a challenge. Some options might have, he said, as few as one or two students across a local partnership, making co-ordinated provision difficult. In this diploma in particular, schools and colleges will have to work together to offer courses.
- 3.17 Another fundamental difficulty for this new qualification, and one that makes it a radical departure for schools, is that half of the compulsory section of the learning on offer must take place ‘in contact with the world of work’. This could involve an employee coming into a school to teach, the provision of online learning by an employer or a business helping a pupil with his or her project, or conventional work experience. The head of a large specialist college said it was not interested in the courses at present. Their breadth, he said, could be a disadvantage, especially when much more tightly-focused, well-established qualifications already valued by employers were available, such as BTECs in performing arts, dance, music composition, media and art and design. He said: “Anyone who is essentially a dancer, or an artist, or a film-maker might find that breadth of definition rather demotivating. BTECs are a specialist qualification, whereas these might not be.”

Information and Communications Technology

- 3.18 The IT diploma is being launched against the backdrop of highly chequered recent attempts to reform computer-related school exams. This provides both an opportunity for the courses and a serious challenge. Unlike other diploma subjects,

this 'line' is seen as feeding the needs of a largely graduate profession, meaning superficially its most obvious current comparator, for the over-16s, is computing A-level. Numbers taking the A-level have collapsed in recent years, from 28,175 in 2003 to 5,610 in 2007. The rival ICT A-level has also slumped, from 18,029 entries to 13,360 over the same period. Both courses are taken overwhelmingly by boys. Acceptances for IT degrees have also fallen by a reported 46 per cent since 2001. With the ICT sector growing much faster than the economy as a whole, many employers have taken to recruiting from abroad.

- 3.19 Into this space comes the diploma. It has been developed by e-skills UK, the Sector Skills Council for information technology and telecoms, which set up a steering group with representatives from leading firms including Vodafone, Microsoft and Cisco Systems who have advised on design. The SSC says 632 employers also contributed, through telephone interviews. The resulting qualification is being billed as transformational, particularly in its attempt to do far more than recognise programming or IT support skills. It aims to meet companies' needs for sophisticated business, technical, interpersonal and project management skills.
- 3.20 Accordingly, high-level capabilities such as analysis of businesses' technology needs, understanding multimedia products and communications skills are emphasised at all three levels. The diploma is assessed mostly through project coursework. For the advanced diploma, students will be expected to run a simulated mini-enterprise, understand the principles of effective change management for technology systems and use mathematical concepts to solve business problems. Options could include computer game development and web design.
- 3.21 A teacher at a sixth form college, who has studied the draft advanced course in detail, was impressed. She said: "The content is really good. And at our open evenings, every student I spoke to was very positive about the courses." Employers, she said, would value the courses. However, she added that the two days' training she had had on teaching the diploma had been of little use: it offered only general guidance on the overall structure of the courses. Only three days' training is being offered in total and, for such a novel qualification, this is a concern. The college's principal said there were other major worries, such as the fact that diplomas did not offer a student who failed to last the two-year course much in the way of compensation, unlike the A-level where students could leave after a year with an AS (the progression diploma is intended to be a fall back but is rated the equivalent of 2.5 A-levels).
- 3.22 It would also have to compete with established courses such as the BTEC in software development, which were more clearly vocational, he said. Competition from other courses is likely to be even more of a worry at the GCSE-equivalent higher level (Level 2). A local authority official who is in contact with hundreds of schools running IT courses said, "people are being quite wary about the diplomas". The reason, he said, was the amount of change through which schools had gone in recent years. Two years ago, more than 1,000 schools introduced an Edexcel qualification called the Diploma in Digital Applications (DIDA), worth four GCSEs in the school league tables and entirely electronic and coursework-based embracing concepts such as multimedia, graphics and project work. Many found it too difficult

for lower-achievers, and have since left for another new qualification, the OCR National. Given the pressure on schools to raise their pupils' results, wholesale moves towards an untested and possibly quite demanding new course appear highly unlikely.

Public Comments

- 3.23 Diplomas/the Diploma have/has some stout supporters. Indeed four have been appointed Diploma Champions to help “raise awareness, support the implementation and increase the take-up of these new qualifications.” (DfES, 2006) Sir Alan Jones, then Chairman of Toyota, was appointed Champion for Employers; Sir Mike Tomlinson, Champion for Schools and Colleges; and Professor Michael Arthur, Vice Chancellor of Leeds University and Professor Deian Hopkin of London South Bank University, Champions for Universities. They are frequently quoted in DCSF press releases along with ministers offering positive comments about diplomas. But those directly responsible for making diplomas happen, or those speaking for them, have voiced a number of concerns which reflect at a national level much of what the individual consortia told us.

Awarding Bodies

- 3.24 Jerry Jarvis, managing director of Edexcel, an awarding body which has invested heavily in the new diplomas, is among those who have spoken out most strongly. In an interview with *The Guardian* he identified a series of problems including teachers not having adequate training, schools not knowing how the new features should be taught, and fears that the qualification will be too demanding for pupils leading to more pupils coming away with no qualification at all (Curtis, 2008b). In evidence to the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee, Greg Watson, chief executive of OCR, described the diploma as “the most complicated qualification I have ever seen”. “We need to recognise the complexity of the qualification in its own right, the practical logistics of how it will be taught, and the fact that it needs to be sorted out in short order” (CSFC, 2008, II, Ev 131, Q197).

Teachers, Schools and Colleges

- 3.25 In a position paper issued at its annual conference in Brighton on March 7, 2008, the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) made every effort to welcome the Diploma since it is in favour of a unified system of post-14 qualifications. But it also listed a number of concerns including: confusion over purpose, “huge uncertainty among ASCL members as to whether we can deliver 17 Diplomas, each at three levels”; and logistical difficulties to do with transport and timetabling. In evidence to the Select Committee (CCSF, 2008, II, Ev 50, para 36) the ASCL had said: “Experience of previous attempts to introduce quasi-vocational qualifications, for example GNVQ, lead ASCL members to be concerned that the assessment of the diplomas may be too much like those of GCSE and A-level. Effective vocationally-centred courses cannot be assessed in the same way as academic courses.”
- 3.26 A survey published by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) on 19 March 2008 (Lipsett, 2008) found that 55 per cent of 241 teachers and lecturers said they had not been given enough training. Nearly 40 per cent said their school or college neither has enough teaching staff in place to give the courses nor enough classroom space to teach them. The National Association of School Masters and

Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) in evidence to the Select Committee (CCSF, 2008, II, Ev 249) expressed concern that the extended project would be unduly burdensome for teachers and pose “significant difficulties in ensuring that individual candidates’ learning is assessed in a way that is sufficiently valid, reliable and comparable.” The National Association of Headteachers (NAHT) has been concerned that the practicalities of child protection checks in industry of staff who might be working with diploma pupils might discourage businesses from wanting to participate (CCSF, I, 2008, page 82).

- 3.27 No independent school has committed to teaching the diploma and they are considering a new Pre-U qualification designed to be more like A-levels as they were. John Bangs of the National Union of Teachers (NUT) has expressed the view that there could be “a fracturing of qualifications along class lines, so that private schools do one type of qualification and others do another” (Shepherd, 2008). The Association of Colleges is concerned that the IT system to manage the project won’t be in place in time. Maggie Scott, a director, told *The Guardian*: “It can’t go ahead without it. We can’t possibly let this fail. That would let down the learners.” (Curtis, 2008b).

Employers and Universities

- 3.28 Susan Anderson, head of human resources at the CBI, is quoted by *The Guardian* (Curtis, 2008c) as saying: “The diploma has the power to be confusing to employers. A-levels and GCSEs are understood by employers. They must be retained. We understand them, we know what they deliver.” The University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) asked its members to publish their views on its website so that students will know whether diplomas are acceptable. About 100 including some of the leading universities put up supportive comments, albeit with caveats (BBC News, 2008b). In general, they said that the diploma was capable of satisfying the general entrance requirement, but there would also be specific requirements according to the course for which application was made. Of the first five diplomas, the only one potentially acceptable to the University of Cambridge is engineering, “subject to students having taken appropriate options within their specialised learning.”
- 3.29 Drilling deeper, a survey of university admissions tutors has found that fewer than 40 per cent saw the Diploma as a “good alternative to A-levels” (BBC News, 2007a). Many it seems agree with the distinguished historian, Niall Ferguson who holds posts at both Harvard and Oxford universities, who in an interview with *The Times* dismissed the Diploma as “not fit for university” (Freaan, 2008a). Even one of the University Champions seemed ambivalent. Professor Smith told the Select Committee (CCSF, 2008, II, Ev 154, Q 275) that the Diploma is “another way of trying to deal with the 54% of school leavers who do not leave at 16 with five GCSEs at grade A to C.”

Common Threads

- 3.30 A number of common threads have emerged from the implementation studies and published comments in relation to both the theory and the practice: preparation; logistics; employment experience, entitlement; acceptance, and structure.

- **Preparation:** Will the courses be ready for the 20,000 guinea pigs in September 2008? It has been a rush to get the specifications out, put the teaching materials together and train the teachers. Both in the particular consortia and in public comments, teachers have expressed concern at the lack of training.
- **Logistics:** What will running 17 diplomas in a consortium across a variety of settings entail? Will it mean large numbers of 14-18-year-olds moving through town and countryside from location to location, or will it mainly be the teachers who are peripatetic? For this to happen all schools and colleges would have to have the facilities and equipment of a standard to mount all 17 lines and this is hardly possible.
- **Employment Experience:** Will there be enough available employment experience to go round? For employers to take a sustained interest it must be clear to them how being involved will contribute to their bottom line. Small and medium size businesses especially will find it hard to accommodate pupils at times convenient for the courses. If it involves a lot of bureaucracy including Criminal Bureau Records checks it may be too much for them.
- **Entitlement:** How will it possible to meet a universal entitlement when some parts of the country are not able to provide relevant work experience, as is the case with engineering on a large stretch of the south coast?
- **Acceptance:** The point of qualifications is to qualify. Will the advanced diplomas be acceptable to the course of choice at the university of choice? Will diplomas be steps on ladders from school to employment? Unless the diplomas are passports to future lives they will be just so many Level 1, 2 or 3 statistics. A number of the leading universities and leading schools, including the independent sector, have been notably cautious.
- **Structure:** What, for example, is to be the role of the Level 1 diplomas. Are they to be a taster for pupils who think they may have practical talents, or as a means of engaging the disaffected? It is doubtful if they can be both (in terms of time commitment if nothing else). The weighting as the equivalent of 7 GCSEs suggests they are intended to be substantial courses but they may not be acceptable to employers. The risk is that they become mainly a way of occupying time.

Conclusion

3.31 None of these potential problems is insurmountable. Some of the immediate issues like lack of readiness will be taken care of as the qualifications bed down. But first impressions are important and if the first diplomas go off half-cock then this may well colour future attitudes to them. If the diplomas prove genuinely valuable universities and employers will use them as they become more familiar with them. Employers will participate if the ways in which they benefit become clear to them. The practicalities seem challenging but no doubt the means can be found of bringing students and teachers together in the right settings.

3.32 But there are more fundamental questions.

- First, in what ways will diplomas be an improvement on the qualifications that are already in place? Will the benefits they bring justify the admittedly very high costs in both time and disruption that introducing them entails. In order to answer that we need to look at the present system and ask what would be gained and what would be lost if it were replaced and we do that in the next chapter.
- Secondly, we need examine the conceptual basis of diplomas/The Diploma carefully to see if the new qualifications have been devised on sound principles to serve sound purposes. This will be our theme for Chapter 5.

4. Present Qualifications

- 4.1 Currently upper secondary schooling in England is served by a wide range of qualifications: A-levels, vocational A-levels, the International Baccalaureate, BTEC and OCR Nationals and other vocational qualifications. The first five new diplomas are due to become available from September 2008 and also waiting in the wings is the Pre-U, an examination devised by Cambridge International Examinations as an alternative to A-levels relying mainly on exams rather than course work.
- 4.2 Chart 4.1 provides a quantitative picture of the landscape in which the government is seeking to plant the Diploma. About three-quarters of the qualifications taken are academic A-levels. The 9,643 places on offer for the first five diplomas at advanced level in 2008 (Chart 3.2, page 10) can be compared with the 228,943 students taking A-levels in 2006 - about 4 per cent. BTEC/OCR Nationals and the vocational A-levels (Advanced VCE) derived from the Advanced GNVQ comprise another fifth. The contribution of the International baccalaureate is miniscule in these terms. Tony Blair proposed that every local authority should have at least one school offering the IB, but that pledge has been dropped (Curtis, 2008a). Nearly all those who pass at least two A-levels go on to university, and academic qualifications in total account for about 70 per cent of university entrants. Of the others, about 15 per cent come via vocational routes, 5 per cent via access courses and 10 per cent have some other or no qualification (UCAS, 2008).

Chart 4.1: School and College Based Qualifications in 2006

Qualification Route	N	Per Cent Examinees	Per Cent Cohort
GCE A Level	228,943	73.5	34.7
Advanced VCE	24,296	7.8	3.7
International Baccalaureate.	1,869	0.6	0.3
BTEC/OCR National	42,985	13.8	6.5
Other	13,394	4.3	2.0
All Examination Routes	311,487	100.0	47.2

Source: *GCE/VCE, A/AS and Equivalent Examination Results in England, 2005/06 (Revised)*. SFR 02/2007.

- 4.3 Charts 4.2 shows the school and college based qualifications in the broader context of work-based qualifications. Overall 72.1 per cent of 17-year-olds were participating in education and training in 2006. Of these 53.9 per cent were working at A-level standard (Level 3), 13.1 per cent at GCSE standard (Level 2) and 5.1 per cent at foundation level or below. The proportion taking A-levels themselves remained at just over a third of the cohort in the six years covered. There had been some decline in vocational A-levels, advanced GNVQs (which were phased out), and advanced apprenticeships, but a near doubling in National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) at Level 3 and equivalents, a category which must include the BTECs since they are not shown separately. There has been some growth in Level 1 and 2 qualifications also, mainly in apprenticeships and vocational qualifications.

Chart 4.2: Per Cent Participation¹ of 17-Year-Olds (Year 13) in England

Population (Thousands)	2001 (611.5)	2002 (637.7)	2003 (636.7)	2004 (655.2)	2005 ² (671.2)	2006 ² (659.5)
GCE A/AS	34.2	34.1	33.8	33.4	34.9	39.9
VCE A/AS, Advanced GNVQ	8.6	7.8	7.9	7.0	5.1	
Advanced Apprenticeships	2.9	2.4	1.9	1.8	1.6	1.5
NVQ3 and equivalents	6.4	7.0	7.9	9.1	11.2	12.5
Total Level 3	52.1	51.3	51.5	51.3	52.8	53.9
GCSE	0.5	0.6	0.5	0.6	0.7	1.0
Intermediate GNVQ	1.8	1.7	1.4	1.0	0.7	
Apprenticeships	4.4	4.6	5.1	5.6	5.6	5.4
NVQ2 and equivalents	3.6	4.0	4.5	5.1	6.0	6.7
Total Level 2	10.3	10.9	11.5	12.3	13.0	13.1
Foundation GNVQ	0.4	0.4	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.1
NVQ1 and equivalents	1.0	1.1	1.3	1.5	1.9	3.1
E2E	0.5	0.6	1.5	1.2	1.0	0.9
Total Level 1	1.9	2.1	3.1	3.0	3.1	4.1
NVQ Learning	1.8	1.4	0.7	0.3	0.1	0.0
Other Courses ³	1.5	1.6	1.8	2.0	1.9	1.0
Grand Total	67.6	67.3	68.6	68.9	70.9	72.1

1. By highest qualification aim.

2. Provisional.

3. Other courses: Includes all courses below Level 1 and those of unknown or unspecified level (also includes pupil referral units and special schools, for which no qualification is available).

Source: *Participation in Education, Training and Employment by 16-18 year olds in England from 2001 to 2006*. SFR 18/2004, 27/2005, 21/2006 and 22/2007. London: DCSF.

4.4 The vocational diplomas were envisaged as the middle way between academic study and work-based learning. In Chart 4.2 we saw that advanced apprenticeships and NVQs or equivalents were the route to Level 3 qualifications for about 14.0 per cent of 17-year-olds, and apprenticeships and NVQs or equivalent were the route to Level 2 qualifications for a further 12 per cent. This 26 per cent compares with the 41 per cent engaged in school or college study.

Apprenticeships

4.5 Chart 4.3 shows that about half the advanced apprenticeships and a third of the apprenticeships are taken by those aged 19 and over. Overall the success rate is rather low. Chart 4.3 shows that in the case of the advanced apprenticeships in 2005-06 it was 44 per cent, with little difference according to age. For the apprenticeship the success rate was just over half (53 per cent) with again little difference between the 16-18-year-olds and the older trainees. Some of the apprentices completed NVQs but not the full apprenticeship and including those raises the success rate to 54 per cent at Level 3 and 58 per cent at Level 2. For those taking NVQs but not apprenticeships the completion rate was 61 per cent. The high dropout rate and low success rate suggest that there could be a role for a third way to provide a more secure underpinning for apprenticeships.

Chart 4.3: Success Rates in Apprenticeships¹, 2005-06, in England²

Programme Type	Age	Overall Success Rate		Total ³ (‘000s)
		% Completed	% Completed or Passed NVQ	
Advanced Apprenticeships	16-18	46	54	24.9
	19+	43	54	28.6
	All	44	54	53.5
Apprenticeships (at Level 2)	16-18	53	58	83.6
	19+	53	59	48.0
	All	53	58	131.6
NVQ Training	16-18	-	56	3.2
	19+	-	66	4.9
	All	-	61	8.2

1. In Learning and Skills Council funded work-based learning.

2. Aug 2005 – 31 July 2006.

3. Total for the year who have either left training or successfully completed the programme or achieved an NVQ required by the apprenticeship framework

Source: Further Education and Work Based Learning – Learner Outcomes in England: 2006 ILR/SFR 13, 17 April 2007. London: DCSF.

The Diploma

- 4.6 What will diplomas/The Diploma add? Diplomas have been presented as one of three main groups of awards in upper secondary schooling -alongside GCSE/A-levels and apprenticeships. We have been here before with GNVQs and their failure should serve as a warning. GNVQs bear at least a superficial resemblance to the new diplomas in being a centrally devised framework and in more or less the same fields, but they were unable to establish mainly because BTEC Nationals were preferred.
- 4.7 This time, however, the government may load the dice by withdrawing funding. A joint advisory committee on qualification approval is to be set up to consider every qualification that the Qualification and Curriculum Authority accredits and recommend whether or not it should receive funding. Currently all accredited qualifications are automatically funded in schools and colleges (Curtis, 2008a). The new diplomas could become the qualifications that have been missing from the qualifications provision, but we need to know this. They should have to prove themselves in fair competition and not have the odds stacked in their favour.
- 4.8 While there is a good case for diplomas as a third route, one all-embracing qualification, the Diploma, implies assimilating and subordinating the other two routes. This makes it urgent to consider what it would add to existing qualifications and what would be lost. It is to these conceptual issues that we now turn.

5. The Diploma Concept

- 5.1 In this chapter we examine the case for diplomas (the individual awards)/the Diploma (an overarching qualification). The key question differs according to which you are talking about. For diplomas it is: do they meet specific needs? And this will eventually be answered by their take-up. For the Diploma it is more general: is it desirable/possible to have a grand design for all upper school qualifications meeting all needs?

DIPLOMAS

- 5.2 It is likely that among the new diplomas there will be some successes. The new engineering diploma could establish engineering in schools, create good ladders from school to work and help address the technician skills shortages – always providing it is something pupils will want to do. The IT diploma could be the qualification that would unravel the paradox of why what seems to be a field opening up numerous opportunities should have been struggling in schools, leaving employers having to recruit overseas. The society, health and development diploma could become an integral part of recruitment to the health service. Properly trialled in the market place some diplomas, but probably not all if the experience of GNVQs is anything to go by, could prove their worth and become an established part of the qualifications scene.
- 5.3 But they are a supply-side invention and that runs the risk of developing qualifications because educators think they should be developed rather than because there is a felt need among users for them. Most successful qualifications in the sense of qualifying people have been demand-led. A-levels are in direct line from the examinations that were originally introduced to qualify for university entrance. The wide variety of vocational qualifications that NVQs and GNVQs sought to replace had grown up to meet particular needs. But both NVQs and GNVQs were centrally-imposed supply-side grand designs intended to encompass all vocational and practical learning. Not surprisingly perhaps, the GNVQ structure collapsed and many NVQs had few if any takers because there was no demand for them (Smithers, 1997). Diplomas may be falling into the same trap: attempting to develop something which is administratively neat and bureaucratically satisfying, but not necessarily in tune with employers' or universities' needs.

THE DIPLOMA

- 5.4 In spite of the failure of the GNVQ framework, which the diplomas much resemble, the Brown government seems seriously tempted by the prospect of a unifying framework encompassing all existing qualifications. It has not publicly stated this. Indeed a recent report from the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee called for the government to come clean (CCSF I, 2008, page 82). And neither has it fully set out its reasons for apparently wanting a compulsory qualifications framework, but we can piece together what they seem to be. The government apparently believes that the Diploma will:
- bring coherence to, and improve, existing qualifications;
 - underpin the requirement to stay in education and training to age 18;

- bring parity of esteem to academic and vocational studies.

We consider each in turn.

A Necessary Improvement?

- 5.5 Essentially three claims are made for the Diploma being an improvement on existing qualifications. First, A-levels are not distinguishing candidates sufficiently well so universities are increasingly resorting to their own entrance tests. Secondly, that a specified combination of studies is better than free choice and, thirdly, that it incorporates experiences and skills lacking from other qualifications. Let examine each of these claims.

Need to Replace A-levels?

- 5.6 There is no doubt that A-levels are not distinguishing as well as they used to. The overall pass rate has risen from 68.2 per cent in 1982 (about which level it had been held since 1951) to 96.9 per cent in 2007, and the proportion of A grades has nearly trebled over that period from 8.9 per cent to 25.3 per cent. This has led to claims of dumbing down (a favourite newspaper story each August) and lack of fairness in university admissions, notably in the case of Laura Spence 2001 (Smithers, 2005). This has led to a search for alternatives including the universities setting their own additional tests and the development of a new qualification, the Cambridge Pre U.
- 5.7 The problem has been recognised by the government and its immediate solution is to make several changes from September 2008 (QCA 2007a). An A* grade is being introduced for those who score 90 per cent or more and the number of units is being reduced in most subjects from six to four. There will also be a broad range of questions including some requiring extended answers, and more assessment to test the student's understanding of the subject as a whole. But generally the content will not change. Without more challenging material these changes risk rewarding the punctilious rather than the genuinely talented. Similarly consistency in the spread of grades across modules which has been mooted as additional information to the universities (Freat, 2007) is not necessarily a sign of outstanding ability if the ceiling is too low.
- 5.8 In the longer term the government seems attracted to the idea of replacing A-levels by the Diploma. We will examine the claims for the supposed benefits of compulsory combinations and added value later, but the important point here is the Diploma would do nothing to improve on the ability of A-levels to distinguish. Indeed, it could make matters much worse by relying on internal assessment for a high-stakes function. This is a bit like asking someone known to have bet on one side to referee a football match. The internal assessment of the Diploma can in no way match independently set and independently marked examinations for fairness and consistency, especially when a major contributor to the grading will be a project where it will be almost impossible to guarantee that it is the candidate's own work. A-levels do need improving but generally they have worked well for over fifty years. It would be the height of folly to toss them aside for a qualification that would be hard to trust. The government is taking steps to improve A-levels and it should seek to further improve them.

Superiority Combined Award?

- 5.9 The main qualifications for schools at present, GCSEs (formerly O-levels) and A-levels, are individual awards that can be combined in a wide variety of ways. They were introduced in 1951 because the predecessor diploma-type qualifications, the School Certificate and Higher School Certificate, were thought to be too inflexible. Pupils could pass most of what was required, but not the whole lot, and they received nothing to show what they had achieved. O- and A-levels were brought in to enable pupils to show what they could do in combinations of studies that had been freely chosen to suit them.
- 5.10 A characteristic of a diploma-type qualification is that it imposes conditions. The International Baccalaureate, for example, requires students to take six subjects from set groupings including an experimental science, an arts subject, a social science and so on. Within this framework it is difficult to put together a platform to study the sciences at university, and some schools which teach the IB also teach A-level in parallel for the scientists. Diplomas embody some notion of breadth which is so desirable that it has to be imposed. In the case of the government's new Diploma, as we have seen, this consists of generic, principal, additional/specialised learning of which 50 per cent has to be work-related. This contrasts with the freedom and flexibility of GCSEs and A-levels where it is possible even to take an extended project as a separate qualification. It will take a Procrustes to fit academic studies into the Diploma and it has to be asked: to what advantage?

Essential Additions?

- 5.11 The four generic components - functional skills; the project; work experience; and personal, learning and thinking skills - are what gives the Diploma its identity and which it is claimed are essential additions to what is provided by GCSEs and A-levels. But the value of all four components is questionable.
- **Functional skills:** While it may be important to build 'catch-up' English, maths and IT into some ladders to work, facility with these subjects should not be an issue for intending university students. It is hard to see what the difference can be between these functional skills and the subjects. If GCSE English does not stand in some sense for functional English then something must be wrong.
 - **Project:** This is put in to develop the capacity for independent study and provide stretch and challenge for the most able, but it will be hard to ensure that it is the student's own work. Course work in GCSE is being reduced because it is so vulnerable to outside help. In the league table climate in which the schools have to operate and the intense competition for some courses in some universities, it will be difficult to trust the project assessments and hence the overall grade of the Diploma.
 - **Work experience:** It is doubtful whether employers will be able to provide the volume of work placements that will be required and it would seem better to use those that there are for specific ladders. Generalising to the notion of work-related experience rather than actual work experience both undermines the original concept and imposes an unnecessary burden.

- **Personal, learning and thinking skills:** These seem to have a now-you-see-it-now-you-don't quality. They are neither to be separately taught nor separately assessed. It is debatable whether, in fact, they are in any meaningful sense 'skills'. It appears that a process of reification has taken place: employers say they want recruits who are good at team-working; some people are better at co-operating than others; they must therefore have more skill at team working; therefore there must be a skill of team-working. But how good people are at co-operating with others is complex and multifaceted. It is not clear that being good at playing in a football team or dancing in a ballet is the same as being generally a good egg or working well in a committee. Team playing and the other 'skills' are probably better regarded as syndromes rather than as skills, that is, as patterns of activities for which some underlying cause is inferred. It is not obvious how they should be identified or taught and hence their somewhat elusive presence in the Diploma.

Underpinning Compulsory Education and Training to Age 18

5.12 A second reason for the present government's interest in the Diploma is as the qualifications underpinning for compulsory education and/or training to the age of 18. International comparisons do tend to show that participation to 18 in England is lower than in most other developed countries (OECD, 2007). The government's response is to compel attendance and a Bill is currently making its way through Parliament. The wisdom of compulsory education and training to age 18 has been severely questioned by Wolf (2007) and Smithers (2008) mainly on the grounds that it is based on superficial economic analysis, it extends childhood and dependence, and removes an essential test of the quality of provision, willingness to participate. Nevertheless the government seems determined to push it through.

Chart 5.1: Persistent Absences

Year Group	Number	Per Cent
Year 6 and Below	1,070	2.0
Year 7	20,140	3.5
Year 8	30,520	5.2
Year 9	41,060	6.8
Year 10	52,810	8.7
Year 11	67,660	11.6

Source: National Statistics First Release, SFR 11/2007, Table 3.2.

5.13 Raising the participation age has led to a particular focus on what have become known as the NEETs, those not in education, employment or training. In 2006 there were 62,650 young people aged 17 in this category. It is hoped that the Diploma will draw them in. But what is striking about the NEETs, as Chart 5.1 shows, is that the overall number aged 17 is not very different from the persistent absentees in the final year of compulsory schooling as it is now. It goes up year-by-year of schooling from a handful in primary schools to nearly 12 per cent of Year 11. Will the Diploma make a difference? It could be argued that the Diploma will make Key Stage 4 more attractive, but even this seems too late. If 14 and 15 year-olds are

already missing from the education system surely absenteeism needs to be tackled lower down the school. Nearly 7 per cent are persistently absent by Year 9. Furthermore, trying to enforce attendance post-16 removes an essential test of the quality of the provision: whether it is valued to the point that young people will choose to participate.

- 5.14 There are also indications that the government is confusing qualifications with skills. Compulsory participation to age 18 also means compulsory qualifications to age 18. At present as well as the NEETs, the 2006 figures show a further 59,350 17-year-olds in employment but not in accredited training leading to qualifications (Smithers, 2007). Since the young people are gainfully employed it can be assumed that they are acquiring skills on the job which the employer does not required to be certified through accredited qualifications. When the new Education and Skills becomes law this will have to change, and it remains to be seen whether compulsory qualifications will enhance the capability of the young people or inhibit employers from employing them.

Parity of Esteem

- 5.15 The third argument frequently put forward for the Diploma is that it will help to overcome the academic/vocational divide, which relegates vocational education to second-class status. By awarding the same qualification to both, it is argued, parity of esteem will be achieved. This is an admirable aim but it suffers from at least two fundamental misconceptions: that there is no intrinsic difference between the academic and vocational; and the value of a qualification can be settled by fiat.

Intrinsic Differences

- 5.16 Academic and vocational learning have different organising principles. Academic subjects are essentially the main ways human beings have found of making sense of the world. Each subject has a particular way of deciding what can be accepted as true. In the case of science it is through checking patterns against external reality, for maths it is deducing from axioms, for history it is documentary evidence, and for subjects like English literature and music it is the extent to which it illuminates. The subject consists of the particular approach to the truth and the body of knowledge so accumulated, and it is conveniently recognised by qualifications like GCSEs and A-levels.
- 5.17 Vocational learning, on the other hand, is preparation for some field of employment. The organising principle comes from specifying that field and it defines what understandings and skills are a necessary part of that preparation. Rather than individual packages vocational learning is best organised as programmes which bring together the necessary maths, English, science and other subjects together with essential practical skills. The diploma format is appropriate for vocational learning, but not for academic subjects. Those responsible for the academic diplomas will find they are having to force their material into the wrong mould.

Parity of Esteem

- 5.18 It is sometimes alleged that it is some kind of snobbishness that leads academic qualifications to be valued over vocational qualifications, but it is not. Different values tend to be assigned to the academic and vocational for three reasons. First, it

is the extent to which they qualify. The main basis of the prestige of A-levels is not that they are academic, but passed at the right level they make it possible to go to the course of choice at the university of choice. Vocational qualifications that similarly open doors are similarly valued. Degrees in medicine - a vocational qualification - are among the most highly valued of degrees. Corgi qualifications in gas fitting are valued because they are essential for working in the field. The trouble with many so-called vocational qualifications is that they are neither necessary for employment nor do they open up opportunities. Schools frequently use them to occupy the less brainy. Secondly, it is the desirability of what the qualification qualifies you for. That is why medical degrees tend to be valued more than Corgi qualifications. Thirdly, the academic and vocational usually relate to different stopping off points in education. The vocational learning of medicine depends on a much greater depth of academic understanding than does say becoming a gas fitter. Doctors are, therefore, still studying academic subjects at a time when those going directly into employment will be engaged in studies which are more vocationally specific.

5.19 Any academic/vocational divide will, therefore, not be overcome by bundling everything up together. The important thing is that the individual qualifications should be valued in their own terms. The big weakness in England's educational provision is its impoverished vocational education. This needs to be tackled directly by focusing on the specific qualifications. Vocational qualifications will be valued to the extent that people want the work and employers will recruit on the qualifications and pay more to people holding them. The value could be underlined by registration schemes like that for gas fitters for say plumbers and hairdressers, which would be a protection to the general public and enable the holders to charge a premium. Creating good ladders from school to work is best tackled by addressing the specific issues rather than in the broad sweep of a qualification. As with A-levels, the Diploma diverts attention from the real problems, to a second order layer of forcing a common format.

5.20 The major claims made for the Diploma - a necessary improvement, underpinning for compulsory participation to age 18, and parity of esteem for academic and vocational studies - do not stand up to close scrutiny. Furthermore, it is possible to see serious weaknesses in the concept:

- confusion of purpose;
- academicization;
- lack of comparability of standards.

Confusion of Purpose

5.21 By upper secondary schooling the different abilities, interests and aspirations of pupils will have begun to emerge. These are better served by an array of qualifications that are valued in their own right rather than attempting to create a 'one-size-fits-all' qualification. It is doubtful if the same qualification can help universities distinguish between the brightest students, bring forward more scientists, create good ladders from school to work, and engage the disaffected. Indeed, the different aims may mutually interfere with one another and lead to a confusion of purposes.

5.22 A potential weakness of vocational education is that it can narrow options. It is vital for the success of the individual diplomas that they do not become a cul-de-sac cutting students off from the opportunities of higher education. But this is wholly different from trying to create a qualification that is equally useful for going on to university or into employment. In some ways it is an admirable ideal to have the one qualification with different stopping off points. But it does not accord with human psychology. People are reluctant to stop half way up a mountain; climbers of different abilities tend to tackle different peaks. If going to university is held up as the summit of the engineering diploma, and high-level maths becomes a requirement, then not only are potential entrants likely to be put off, but those who do opt for employment are likely to feel in some sense second best.

Academicization

5.23 Even with more specific aims diplomas may find it hard to establish themselves as a major currency. They are the latest in a long line of attempts to create a middle way between academic studies and work-based training, through offering practical learning but not tied to particular jobs. None of their predecessors - the Technical and Vocational Initiative, General National Vocational Qualifications, or vocational A-levels – have bedded down in the English educational scene. There have been successful vocational qualifications – City and Guilds, RSA secretarial and clerical and BTECs – but these have tended to be job-specific qualifications taught in further education. They have arisen in response to specific requirements rather than being thrown up in some big supply-side bang.

5.24 Schools have generally found it difficult to cope with vocational education, not least because they do not usually have the equipment and expertise to teach it to the standards industry requires. Instead the programmes of study gradually become academicized into something with which the schools feel comfortable (the same is true to some extent of the universities). It tends to become writing about how to do things rather than the direct acquisition of practical knowledge. Not surprisingly, it comes to be seen as less valuable than academic study or actual work-based learning.

5.25 There is a serious attempt to put employers in charge and build experience in actual employment settings into the new diplomas and that gives them a better chance of success than previous attempts. But insisting on 10 days work experience per level for everyone may mean the employers cannot cope. It would be better in our view to concentrate on using the potentially limited resource in direct routes from school to work and making it possible to offer more than the 10 days. But the thrust is towards the Diploma encompassing everything and this is likely to lead to a shortage of work experience places and the qualifications gradually being turned into something with which schools can cope - academic versions of practical learning.

Assessment and Comparability of Standards

5.26 As the diplomas have begun to take shape major concerns have been expressed about assessment and comparability of standards within and across them. The teacher unions tend to argue strongly against national examinations, independently set and marked, especially when the results become scores in league tables. They make the case for teachers to be trusted as professionals to do the assessing since they know the pupils. In the Diploma they seem to have got their way. Assessment

will be mainly internal, subject to moderation and verification. This sounds plausible, but closer inspection raises considerable doubts. These are of two main kinds: the trustworthiness of the grades and the practicalities.

Credibility

- 5.27 Judging human performance is difficult. Controversies over decisions in boxing, dancing and talent competitions continually demonstrate this. The best that can be hoped for is expert, fair and dispassionate judgement. But while teachers may be expert they can hardly be dispassionate if their own jobs are put on the line by the results the pupils obtain. This is not to impugn the integrity of teachers; only to argue that rationally they will play to the rules of the game they find themselves in. If the diploma outcomes are high stakes for schools and the teachers themselves it is unwise to expect the teachers themselves to do the assessing.
- 5.28 A teacher can also only have a limited range of experience. Good performance for a teacher in one school may be quite different from that in another since the ranges of ability they see regularly may be quite different. It will be argued that differences in standards can be ironed out through suitable checks, but this will require a time consuming and bureaucratic super structure, and who will moderate and verify the moderators and verifiers? It is curious that at a time when the abuses of course work in GCSE have been recognised, an extended project has been made a central plank of the advanced diploma. It will not only be difficult to ensure that it is the actual work of the candidates themselves but also in a high-stakes situation for schools difficult to ensure the objectivity of the marking. If teachers and schools are being judged by the results it makes sense for them to secure the highest marks possible for their pupils. Since the pupils are moving on it will be for the universities and employers to suffer the consequences of any inflated marking not the schools themselves.
- 5.29 If the Diploma is to have national credibility as a means of access to universities and employment it must be trustworthy. But internal assessment is likely to mean that diplomas are of very variable standard, not only between subjects but also within them. With A-levels, strenuous efforts are made to ensure both comparability between qualifications and consistency over time, but even they are not perfect. The chair of the new exams regulatory body, Kathleen Tattersall, has said that inconsistencies in marking and exam papers were bound to cause variations in the results obtained (Frean, 2008b). However, any problems experienced by the independently set and marked A-levels are likely to be of nothing as compared to the difficulties of ensuring comparability within and between diplomas. A diploma will not be a diploma will not be a diploma in the way a metre is a metre is a metre. Rather in the manner of the degree, universities and employers will want to know not only what has been studied but also where it has been studied. Instead of opening up opportunities diplomas could make them more dependent on who you are and where you are.

Practicalities

- 5.30 The sheer scale of the demands of internal assessment and the production of detailed transcripts should not be underestimated. GCSEs and A-levels are tried-and-tested, well administered and well regulated national examinations. But every year

concerns are expressed about whether there will be enough markers, whether in the rush to get out results mistakes have been made, and the comparability of standards. The reform of A-levels known as Curriculum 2000 produced some odd results and in the ensuing row both the Chairman/Chief Executive of the QCA and the Secretary of State left their jobs. But Curriculum 2000 was merely an attempt to improve existing qualifications. The Diploma would overturn existing qualifications completely and the shift to internal assessment would remove from the universities a reliable means of distinguishing applicants. It would almost certainly mean universities having to set or buy in their own tests.

Conclusion

- 5.31 It seems as if the Diploma programme is trying to be all things to all people. It is seeking to achieve parity of esteem for academic and vocational qualifications, provide better routes from school to work, increase participation in higher education, particularly in the sciences and engineering, solve the perceived problem of the NEETs, and improve on A-levels by providing more stretch and challenge for the very able. It has been argued, notably in the Tomlinson Report (DfES, 2004), that this can all be achieved through the Diploma. But in going for an all-embracing framework it seems that there is a serious risk of necessary specificity being lost.
- 5.32 What makes a qualification valuable is what it qualifies you for. If diplomas become the preferred method of recruitment to particular areas and confer an advantage in gaining desired goals, they will become valued. If not, they are likely to go the way of other worthy attempts to create a middle way between academic education and work-based learning. It is conceivable they will bed down, but the present conceptual and practical difficulties do not augur well for the recognition of the Diploma by employers and universities.
- 5.33 As things stand, the government is proposing to run diplomas alongside other qualifications with a review to be undertaken in 2013. If a fair market trial is conducted it will show what parents, pupils, schools, universities and employers actually want. At present, diplomas are subject to heavy promotion. There is even talk of funding being withdrawn from alternative qualifications like the BTEC which saw off GNVQs. Perhaps all the hype and persuasion is necessary to get diplomas off the ground in an already crowded and highly competitive market. But to succeed diplomas/the Diploma will have to meet real needs and not be just some grand unifying theory.

6. The Way Forward

- 6.1 In this chapter we propose a way forward. The quality of life in any country clearly depends on its young people developing their abilities to the full through education and training and a set of qualifications to serve the needs of a successful society and dynamic economy. It is our contention that those needs are best met by an array of qualifications of different shapes and sizes that are developed organically to perform specific functions rather than one centrally imposed framework into which everything is forced to fit. We set out the steps by which we reached this position and they lead us to twelve recommendations.

Opportunities

- 6.2 Children come into the world with big but unformed and untutored brains. As they go through life they will each have to come to terms with the deep mysteries of being human on a small planet in an infinite universe. Eventually they will have to come to terms with the certainty of death. It is vitally important that all children should be given the best possible preparation for creating meaning and living a life, and it is reasonable to require them to be in education for a period whether they want to be or not.
- 6.3 But for how long? It is necessary for there to be sufficient time for them to learn how to handle words and numbers, to behave properly and to engage with the main ways of making sense of the world that we call the academic subjects. If education means anything at all, as the children move up through school they will become increasingly aware of their abilities and interests, and increasingly able to take charge of their own lives. They will want to go in many different directions. Thus while the early stages of education have to require attendance to ensure breadth of experience, the later stages of formal education should be based not on compulsion but on opportunities. We can think of it as an oak tree with a trunk of required curriculum bearing main branches of opportunities. If it is not stretching the analogy too far the Diploma seems like an attempt to wrap round these branches, trying to bind together when their nature is to spread out in different directions. Our first recommendation therefore is:

That the government should consider the advantages of an array of qualifications for upper secondary schooling responding to different needs and not to seek to force everything into a common framework.

- 6.4 The advantages of an array are that the qualifications can be designed validly for specific purposes, that studies can be combined flexibly to suit the needs of the learner, employers and universities, and freedom of choice will act to drive up quality. We already have a partial array in which A-levels aren't fundamentally broke and so do not need radically fixing, and BTECs have a good track record as routes to employment. There is something solid on which to build. Contrast these advantages with seeking to impose an untried and untested grand design at huge effort and great expense, where the specific improvements become less important than forcing through a general structure. We therefore recommend:

That the government should ask itself whether the apparent benefits of a common shape and the unifying threads of the Diploma - functional skills; the project; work experience; and personal, learning and thinking

skills - outweigh the losses involved in overturning the accumulated experience of a century.

Skills

- 6.5 It is important to recognise the intrinsic differences between academic and vocational learning. They have different organising principles. In the case of academic subjects it is the means by which truth is established about the world and the body of knowledge so accumulated; in the case of vocational fields it is the combination of knowledge and skills which puts the person in a good position to engage in a field of employment. This fundamental difference suggests the need for different types of qualification. Vocational learning should consist of programmes bringing together the English, maths, science, practical skills and other learning which are the necessary preparation for the employment field. Completion of that programme is appropriately recorded in a diploma-type qualification. On the other hand, academic subjects are better certificated individually so they can be combined flexibly. It is very hard to put both academic and vocational learning into the same qualification structure while being true to both. The attempt to turn the diploma-type GNVQs into vocational A-levels was soon abandoned. Conversely, A-levels were introduced in 1951 because of the restrictions which the previous diploma-type qualifications imposed on academic studies.

It is important to recognise that academic and vocational learning have different organising principles, which are best served by different types of qualification.

- 6.6 In its desire to improve life chances and secure a sound economy the government seems to be confusing qualifications with skills. It is perfectly possible to have skills without qualifications and indeed qualifications without skills. Some of the most sought-after opportunities are open to those without qualifications. Ask our footballers, media stars, and Members of Parliament even. This is because the talents and skills are demonstrable directly and not dependent on a certificate to act as proxy. Neither can all the qualities we want to be developed be captured in qualifications - consider the difficulties that are being experienced in putting personal, learning and thinking skills into practice.
- 6.7 Qualifications can have a number of different purposes - to motivate, record achievement, protect the public - but chief among them is to qualify. They are necessary when someone achieves something in place A and needs to be able to prove it in place B. That is why A-levels are so important: they act as a currency enabling schools to transact with the universities and other users. Qualifications may be important in employment especially where employers have allowed schools, colleges and other providers to undertake preparation and training on their behalf. But it is also true that a person may become highly skilled in employment without the need to demonstrate it through formal and accredited qualification. A reason for the comparative lack of success of NVQs is they have added little to the skills already mastered and their portability can leave an employer vulnerable to poaching. There has been a tendency in recent years to get carried away with notions of 'Level Twoness' and 'Level Threeness' and attempting to relate them to the success of the economy (cf Leitch 2006). But it is the specifics that are much more important than the generality. Qualifications of themselves will not improve the economy - it will

be the knowledge, understanding and skills acquired and not all can or need be captured in qualifications.

It is important to recognise the distinction between qualifications and skills; qualifications do not necessarily guarantee skills and people can be highly skilled without having formal qualifications.

A-levels

- 6.8 A-levels are in direct line of descent from university matriculation examinations (Smithers and Robinson, 1991). Entrance examinations for universities in England were introduced in the nineteenth century. There was no school leaving examination at the time and some schools put in their pupils for the examination as a form of certification even though they had no intention of going to university. London University spotted a business opportunity and introduced a School Certificate in 1902 and a Higher School Certificate in 1905. Oxford and Cambridge followed suit but the state took over in 1917 with national certificates, but even to this day the exam boards are mainly based in the major universities. The school certificates were diploma-type awards and it was possible to pass large parts of them while falling down on a particular requirement and not getting any award. This was thought to be too restrictive and in 1951 the certificates were replaced by O-levels and A-levels which enabled schools and pupils to tailor their own courses and have achievements individually recognised. The universities eventually gave up their own entrance examinations in favour of A-levels.
- 6.9 Examinations can have many different purposes and their validity may differ according to purpose. A-levels were specifically designed for university entrance and have proved themselves to be fit for that purpose for over fifty years. They have been adapted as the transactions between schools and universities have changed, as the higher education system has expanded. But their essential purpose has remained the same: enabling universities with more applicants than places to distinguish between candidates. Not all the modifications to A-levels have been successful and there is a need for continual scrutiny and improvement. A-levels have not been distinguishing sufficiently well at the top end, and the leading universities have been re-introducing their own entrance tests. It may be the introduction of the new A* grades will meet this need. But, essentially, A-levels have served us well. This leads us to point out and recommend that:

A-levels are not working as well as they should at present but this is better remedied by building on what is there rather than throwing everything into the melting pot;

The Diploma does little to deal with existing weaknesses in qualifications for the 14 to 18 age range, but brings significant problems of its own to do with specifying, combining and assessing;

The government should recognise that internal assessment is not sufficiently robust to withstand the pressures of competitive university entrance and employment recruitment.

Practical Learning

6.10 While England has had good ladders from school to university, it has not so far been successful in devising good ladders from school to work. It did at one stage have a wide array of successful vocational qualifications devised by bodies like City and Guilds, Royal Society of Arts and the Business and Technician Council and its forerunners in response to specific employer needs. They were not taught in schools, but in colleges and employment settings. In an attempt to rationalise these qualifications the National Council for Vocational Qualifications was set up in 1986 and the approach it adopted was not unlike the present pursuit of the Diploma. It came up with a framework and sought to shoehorn all existing qualifications into it. It also had a matrix of possible fields and levels and where a cell was empty it set about creating a qualification to fill the space even though the market had not demonstrated a need for such an award. Neither the work-based NVQs nor the version designed for schools, GNVQ, really took off. While the GNVQ has been phased out the BTECs that it was intended to replace have prospered. NVQs still struggle to compete against the numerous qualifications developed for specific purposes, in spite of all the official support they have received.

Lessons should be learned from the failure of GNVQs and the lack of take-up of NVQs as centrally devised matrices that led to qualifications being developed which did not correspond with actual employer needs.

6.11 Schools generally have neither the equipment nor expertise to teach practical skills to employment standards. When something 'vocational' is taught in schools it is not generally in the expectation that the successful will be snapped up by employers. Rather it has been a way of keeping the less brainy occupied. While there were good vocational qualifications on offer in the colleges, usually pupils had had to have done relatively poorly at school to consider taking them. Not surprisingly, vocational qualifications have come to be seen as second best. This has been exacerbated by the fact that many vocational qualifications don't really qualify. They are not used for recruitment by employers and unlike Germany and other countries there are few registration schemes dependent on the award of a vocational qualification.

6.12 The task of developing good courses and qualifications for practical skills should not be underestimated. There has been a long line of failures from TVEI to GNVQs to vocational A-levels. But the new vocational diplomas announced by the Blair government offered real hope of success. Employers had been put in the driving seat - essential if the qualifications are to qualify. The vocational diplomas were being devised as programmes of integrated knowledge and skills; and it was recognised that they could not be just school based but needed to involve consortia of colleges, employers and others. Even the functional skills, project and work experience make sense in this context. There may need to be some necessary catching up in English and maths, practical skills can be practised and demonstrated through a project, and work experience is essential with ten days probably being too little.

6.13 But this new attempt at developing good vocational qualifications for upper secondary schooling has been put at risk by the attempt to turn the diplomas into the Diploma. This shift from the specific to the general fogs the original intentions. It may well be that there is a real need for good ladders from school to work in

engineering, construction, health and care, IT and other fields. But they need to be devised validly for this purpose. They will not enhance lives or the economy unless they hone up knowledge and skills to the point they open doors to the successful. They will have to prove themselves. Their successful introduction will require considerable imagination, funding and hard work. Spreading the jam thinly across a grand design to include everyone and everything makes it less likely that the specifics will be accomplished. The valuable resource of work experience should be devoted to those courses where it can do most good, and not scattered in the pursuit of uniformity.

The emphasis should return to developing vocational diplomas as routes into employment. By putting employers in the driving seat the vocational diplomas as originally proposed offered real hope of filling a huge gap in the qualifications structure, but this is being put at risk as the emphasis shifts from the development of qualifications for specific purposes to bringing in a grand design to include everyone and everything.

- 6.14 The validity and usefulness of a qualification depends on a clear sense of purpose. The gap in England's education is for courses and qualifications aimed at intermediate positions such as technician and other support roles. There is a crucial shortage in fields such as the pharmaceutical, engineering and construction industries. It is important that such qualifications should not close off the opportunity to progress further, but this is very different from attempting to design a qualification that is equally valid for university entrance and specific employment opportunities. In trying to do both it may satisfy neither; not be acceptable for university entrance nor developing the skills employers need.

We recommend that the purpose of diplomas be clarified by distinguishing between qualifications designed so as not to close off opportunities for university entrance from those designed to facilitate university entrance.

- 6.15 Thus to summarize: our view of the way forward is to adopt a model of qualifications for upper secondary schooling which is an array not one all-encompassing framework. The qualifications should be demand-led, not supply-side provided. Our ten previous recommendations lead to two main proposals for action:

The government should come clean on whether the intention is to introduce diplomas or the Diploma; are diplomas to be qualifications alongside existing qualifications or are they and existing qualifications to be subsumed into the one Diploma?

The government should allow a fair market test to discover what qualifications universities, employers, parents, schools and pupils really want rather than pushing the Diploma to the point that it seems that it has already decided on the outcome of the 2013 review.

- 6.16 There is already much on which to build. A-levels generally are fit for purpose but can be improved. Previous attempts at putting in place good courses and qualifications to develop practical talents have foundered and this is where energies should be concentrated. It will be a disaster if ideas, energy and resources are dissipated on the Procrustean bed of uniformity.

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