

POLICY WATCH

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The Select Committee Inquiry into 14 -19 specialised Diplomas

The Select Committee Inquiry into specialised Diplomas is providing an excellent opportunity for gathering together current thoughts on specialised Diplomas. Bags of evidence has been submitted, some of it written, including from amongst others the DfES, QCA, SSCs and the Professional Associations while a number of key witnesses have given oral evidence. Over recent weeks the Schools Minister and reps from QCA, SSCs and other bodies have all sat down in front of the Committee and faced such probing questions as 'are the ducks all lined up yet?'

The Inquiry hasn't finished yet but there's a rich vein of evidence building up and this all points to an important piece of work taking shape. So what are the key messages? Perhaps six stand out at present.

Firstly, that the Government remains committed to 14 - 19 Diplomas even though there's still some uncertainty about exactly what they are. Pressed by the Committee as to whether they were vocational or applied, education or training, the Schools Minister opted for 'betwixt the two.' The clearest definition is actually in the DfES written submission. This has them "as a highly valued mixed theoretical and practical route for young people which genuinely meets the needs of employers and providers and provides a sound basis for progression into HE." A more cerebral version can be found in the QCA submission which has them as "aiming to achieve growth in both the cognitive domain and the affective domain." 'A career orientated option for those young people who clearly want to develop the skills to hit the ground running when they enter the world of work' as one SSC put it. 'Vocational education rather than vocational training' in Ken Boston's words.

All of which has led to further questioning as to why these Diplomas are needed when vocational education options already exist, many of which like BTECs are well established and as the AoC explained "are tried and tested qualifications that have proved to be motivating and have successfully retained young people." And it wasn't just colleges saying this, the National Association of Head Teachers argued that "any suggestion that BTEC funding may be discontinued has proved unhelpful and alarming for many of our members." The Minister confirmed that this was not his intention. 'Nothing' he said 'would be turned off' before the entitlement is in place in 2013, then the market will drive what it wants and anyway some vocational components may well be within Diplomas by then. As to why Diplomas are being created, two main reasons were offered. One by the Minister that they would usher in a new form of learning that would be more attractive to young people and the other more eloquently from Ken Boston that this is a new approach. "It embodies a radical but internationally proven approach to learning by drawing on a curriculum that reflects not only the traditional academic disciplines but the disciplines of contemporary British business and industry." The reality of this can be seen in evidence from the SSCs. To quote one, E- skills has '20 employers on our employer steering group involved in in -depth monthly meetings with awarding bodies ...and some 630 have provided detailed telephone input.'

Much of the evidence points to Diploma development being a complex business, in QCA's words, "requiring exacting standards of project management and programme delivery" but the second message is that the Project is on course and sticking to timescales. Many witnesses pointed to the pressures the timescales were causing; "a less frenetic timescale with more opportunity for schools and colleges, and in turn parents and students, to understand the opportunities and realities is essential" argued the NAHT. But as Ken Boston said "there would be great disappointment and serious damage" if things were delayed for a year. There were however two caveats. Firstly that as John Bangs of the NUT and Karen Price of E-skills proposed, there should be a proper risk assessment conducted first and secondly that the Gateway should ensure that only those ready should proceed.

The third message is that the shadow of Tomlinson still lingers. Perhaps provoked by the Government claim that it is implementing 'almost 90% of Tomlinson,' the Chairman pressed the Schools Minister as to whether he felt this was the case. The Minister wisely declined to play percentages but felt they were being true to much of Tomlinson. Ken Boston's view was that the Diplomas "capture the essence of Tomlinson." Perhaps the spirit has been bottled but John Bangs made an interesting comment. He felt that when Tomlinson was rejected, ownership went as well. By contrast Government White Papers tend to feel imposed not owned.

The fourth message is about workforce development and whether the stated three face - to - face days of official training will be sufficient. Of course, as the Minister pointed out, many people are not starting from scratch; there is good practice out there and anyway they're investing £50m to provide support through the listed "coalition of agencies." The NAHT remained concerned and the NUT unconvinced. This may well run as an issue with the integration of functional skills and PLTS, personalised learning and the absence of any clear pedagogy all being highlighted.

The fifth message is about collaborative provision and the very mixed picture that there seems to be on this; "from the hesitatingly enthusiastic to the frighteningly unaware" as one member described it. The AoC submission indicated "different pictures were emerging in respect of partnership formation" while the Association of School and College Leaders argued that "many of the policy drives in the system still promote competition." The DfES helpfully listed "5 characteristics needed for the development of successful partnerships" - a shared sense of ownership, strategic leadership and vision, clear objectives and organisation, recognition of individual strengths and access to professional advice - but it seems clear, that as ASCL indicate, Government policies have created conflicting pushes and pulls while the demise of the Increased Flexibility funding has added to the unease. Local strategic leadership as outlined in the 2006 Education Act seems the key here.

And the sixth headline message is that there is now new, strengthened leadership around the Diploma project at the highest levels. This follows the health check carried out by the DfES last autumn and which has resulted in some significant changes. They are perhaps most simply described in the QCA submission and include "the appointment of a DfES project director supported by external consultants; the addition of reps from the awarding bodies and SSCs to the 14 - 19 programme board; refocusing of the Diploma Board and the Diploma Advisory Group; and the establishment of a regular meeting, chaired by Ministers, of the chief executives of the non departmental public bodies responsible for the various aspects of Diploma development and delivery."

Less being lined up, more formation flying perhaps.

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