

POLICY WATCH

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Independent schools offer some thoughts on 14 - 19 reforms

According to DCSF figures released last week, over 800 schools and 150 colleges, the largest concentrations being in the North West and London, will be involved in the first wave of Diplomas to be launched this September. *"Diplomas are proving a popular choice for schools and colleges"* said Ed Balls, although the Times Ed begged to differ; *"it is still not known how many will actually run the courses or how popular they will be with pupils."* Exact figures will not be known until Local Authorities firm up their 2008 numbers for funding purposes next month.

For many people though, Diplomas will only truly have arrived once they have been embraced across the whole schools sector, independent as well as state; at that point Ed Balls's aspiration for Diplomas to be *'the qualification of choice'* comes a step nearer. The Schools Minister, Jim Knight claims to be *"confident that independent schools will be eager not just to join in but to lead and shape the future."* Yet the recently released Ipsos MORI research on GCSEs and A level suggests that awareness of the Diploma among independent school teachers is lower than amongst colleagues in other sectors, 48% as against 60% for teachers in state secondaries and 61% for teachers in FE colleges.

In addition, a recent Paper from the HMC (the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference,) the body that represents some 250 leading independent schools, indicates that at this stage at least, Jim Knight's confidence may be premature. *"There's much in the Diplomas that independent schools would recognise and value"* the Paper says, but at present there are *"four potential drawbacks."*

First and most obviously is the issue of collaboration. Schools delivering Diplomas need to work together in collaborative arrangements, this is one of the founding principles of Diploma delivery, indeed one of its strengths, yet one that would cause particular difficulties for the independent sector. As the Paper says, *"how many parents will be prepared to pay independent school fees for their child to be educated post - 16 partly, if not mainly, in the local maintained sector school or college?"* This requires a form of collaboration that goes beyond the sharing of resources or opportunities that many independent schools currently undertake, let alone the Anthony Seldon model of enlightened sector partnership. It may lead to a model, to a model of collaboration that those purchasing this brand of education would not countenance.

Second, the fact that Diplomas are group awards and as such students need to pass all the bits to be able to gain an award and thus potentially entry to university. There seem to be two issues here; one is about the size of the overall Diploma and whether there would be 'space' for students to undertake other enrichment activities and the other is about how far independent schools can rely on Diplomas for university entry. University entry is of course a big issue for independent schools and despite the UCAS tariff recognition of Diplomas announced just before

Christmas, there is still uncertainty about how widely they will be accepted for progression. In reality, a lot will depend on the course, an Engineering Diploma will be generally welcome as Engineering courses are hard to fill, others may be less so. It will also depend on how well prepared initial applicants for HE entry are. *"If institutions' initial experiences with Diploma students were generally negative then that would have implications for the recruitment in subsequent years,"* a Report from the 1994 Group of universities explained the other week. The chief recruiting universities as far as independent schools are concerned are the 20 or so major research intensive universities that constitute the Russell Group. Their view, summarised in a positional statement last October, is predictably cautious. *"Our member universities are in the process of assessing the academic rigour and general suitability of the diploma as a route to higher education."*

Third is a concern that the applied nature of the Diplomas would be difficult for independent schools to deliver. This seems to suggest that independent schools don't do applied learning or perhaps don't feel confident enough to deliver it effectively. In fact just under 30% of independent schools do offer vocational provision of some sort, BTECs, NVQs and so on and the sector as a whole recognises that this can add value in certain cases. The issue seems to be that since the principal learning component of the Diplomas has shifted away from existing qualifications to new DDP derived models this has made things harder for such schools to deliver in terms of staff expertise, resources and so on.

Fourth is a common concern, that of work experience, and not just any work experience but that related as closely as possible to the principal learning component. The view is simply that *"this will not be possible;"* one can guess why but it is something that all schools face.

It should be said that the HMC Paper is not arguing against Diplomas as such, rather it is trying to preserve a feature that is cherished by the independent sector and looked on enviously by those less able to exercise it - namely freedom of choice in matters of the curriculum. *"The freedom of independent schools to use their independence in the interests of their pupils (sic) is a huge asset"* it argues, *"and nowhere is this more evident than in 14 - 19 education."*

The suitability of GCSEs, the interest in iGCSEs, the need to differentiate at the top end of A level, these are all areas where independent schools have exercised their freedom in recent years, in each case to ensure best fit for their students. At present, HMC see this freedom of choice being more rather than less important as the number of curriculum pathways for 14 - 19 year olds opens up from the traditional three routes to five: the GCSE/GCE route; the IB/AQA BAC/Pre U composite route; the Diploma route; the vocational qualification route; and the Apprenticeship route. *"The need for strategic planning"* it argues, *"has never been greater"* and the Paper goes on to prove the point. On GCSEs, for instance, it argues for continued support but also for 'ways of reducing the assessment burden and dominance of the exam itself.' On A level, still favoured by between 80 and 90% of independent schools in England *"as their main qualifications,"* the prevailing view is to support the current reforms, *"the overall view is that the A level has been saved."* On the International Bac, recognition that it can offer 'genuine breadth and challenge at the top end' but that *"timetabling complexities and associated costs are deterring some schools from this option."*

Curriculum choice can be a minefield but it's easier when it's unfettered.

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