

## POLICY WATCH

2008/18

13 March 2008

### An extended line. Ed Balls announces the introduction of Extended Diplomas

*"We're all neo - Toms now."* That was how Ken Boston, Chief Executive of QCA, greeted the latest Diploma development announced by Ed Balls at the annual conference of the Association of School and Colleges Leaders (ASCL) last Friday. *"Today I can announce,"* he said, *"that I am accepting the advice of the Expert Advisory Group and introducing a new Extended Diploma to recognise and reward a larger range of achievement by all students."*

Does the announcement really mean that the Tomlinson Diploma model, the model that many felt had been knifed three and a bit years ago, is alive and well after all? The Government has spent much of the last year or so claiming that it was honouring 80 - 90% of Tomlinson; not everyone believed it but perhaps the evidence is now here for all to see. Not only does Ken Boston obviously think so but even the man himself, Sir Mike, believes that this latest announcement *'represents the final implementation of the original plan.'*

So what is an Extended Diploma? As Ed Balls said, the idea was not his but that of his Expert Advisory Group. Since last autumn this Group has been advising the Secretary of State on the principles for the three 'general' Diplomas and 14 - 19 developments in general. Put simply their view seems to be that there was a gap in the proposed Diploma provision, in effect some students could do with a bit more stretch and challenge and others with a bit more choice - hence an Extended Diploma. At A' level for example, the argument is that some 20,000 16 - 18 year olds take programmes equivalent to four or more A levels and as such would not have been fully stretched by an Advanced Diploma currently deemed to equate to 3.5 A' levels. At Foundation and Higher Key Stage 4 levels, students may need additional time for English and maths let alone other subjects, these too needed catering for in an extended model.

In summary, the Extended Diploma, which will not become fully available until 2011, will have the same structure as other Diplomas but with greater opportunities built into it, typically an extended core and an extended block of Additional and Specialist Learning. It will thus provide a bit of extra headroom for further learning and a bit of extra space for intensive learning. As such, it seems part of the natural evolution of the Diploma model that has moved on apace under Ed Balls and shifted significantly from the twin track model of Ruth Kelly.

There will be many who find the constant tinkering with the Diploma frustrating, others will question whether an extended version is really appropriate for 14 - 16 year olds, others that the whole thing is becoming too complex - 119 individual courses on top of A' levels and GCSEs as ASCL General Secretary John Dunford reminded the conference - but inevitably most debate will be around the impact on A' levels. Is this the Government trying to manage the dismantling of A' levels in the run up to 2013? Some of the media thought so; *"a move that will be seen as a*



*Government attempt to lure middle class children towards the controversial vocational qualifications*" as the *Daily Telegraph* put it, "greater academic clout to rival A' levels" as the *Education Guardian* concluded. Obviously much hinges on how Diplomas and A' levels perform up to 2013 but three points are worth making. First, that in many eyes, Diplomas will only truly have taken off when they are offered by all schools not just some. This announcement could thus be a gauntlet for an independent sector which expressed its concerns last month. Second, and a familiar concern, when alternative qualifications are 'academised,' made to look on the box like traditional academic qualifications, they often end up as poor imitations of them; it's the difference that should stand out. But third, if this move does lead eventually to an open qualification framework in which all existing qualifications are subsumed and achievement is instead recognised and recorded progressively on a student transcript, then the sterile debate about the relative worth of different types of qualification dissipates, arguably for the benefit of all.

This takes us to the question of the extent to which Tomlinson has risen from the ashes and been incarnated within the latest Diploma developments. For this, we need to go back to October 2004 and the 190 page Final Report from the Working Group on 14 - 19 Reform to see what was proposed at the time.

Some of the language may have changed in the intervening few years, for example what we now call Personal Learning and Thinking Skills (PLTS,) Tomlinson called common knowledge, skills and attributes (CKSA.) Some of the positioning has also changed, for example work experience is more centralised now than it was under Tomlinson. And some of the design lines are different, for example Tomlinson proposed a common template of Core + Main Learning while the current Diploma model has a three part template, Principal learning + Generic Learning + Additional and Specialist Learning.

But in essence there are considerable similarities. Tomlinson specified levels of functional skill achievement and introduced an Extended Project, so do the current Diplomas; Tomlinson proposed a framework of Diplomas, four rather than the current three, credit based, interlocking in nature and with current qualifications subsumed, the current Diploma system is moving in that direction; Tomlinson proposed a mix of internal and external assessment led by a network of Chartered Assessors, the current system has a similar mix led by Lead and Domain Assessors; Tomlinson proposed involvement by employers and HE, the current system has formalised this within Diploma Development Partnerships; Tomlinson stressed the importance of quality teaching and learning and especially learner feedback and tutorials, the current Diplomas depend on 'innovative teaching and learning; and Tomlinson called for collaborative models of provision, centre approval and phased implementation, all in turn adopted by the current Diploma system.

So is the debate about the virtues or otherwise of the Tomlinson model for 14 - 19 reform now over? Not completely because what we now have is a space of five years, up to the review of 14 - 19 qualifications in 2013, when the merits or otherwise of A' levels, Diplomas, GCSEs and current vocational qualifications will all be fiercely debated; "*muddying the waters*" as the Editorial in the *Independent* described it. During this time the Diploma model will come under further pressure. Indeed, the ASCL at its conference produced its own "preferred solution" - the General Diploma, comprising the current 17 Diplomas, mainstream provision like GCSEs, BTECs, NVQs and AS and A2s, functional skills and a Project, "effectively an English Bac." Neo - Toms or neo - cons, take your positions.

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