

POLICY WATCH

2007/39

17 May 2007

The Education and Skills Committee Report on 14 - 19 Diplomas

No one simple headline, instead a hefty list of 31 conclusions/recommendations mark this 60+ page Report on 14 - 19 Diplomas released by the Education Select Committee today. Described as "a short and focused inquiry into the design and implementation of the Diplomas in the light of concerns raised," the Committee has nevertheless found time over the last few months to question 14 witnesses and plough through 45 written submissions. Like the Nuffield Report six months previously, this Report makes for serious reading.

So how's it looking? Broadly six themes emerge.

The first of these is missed opportunities. The 14 - 19 reform programme is a major reform programme not just of the qualification offer but also of the way in which learning and support services are provided. It has been talked about for a long time and many people have been swept along with it, but there's still a sense that this is an opportunity missed rather than one gained.

For most people that missed opportunity became evident sometime between October 2004 and February 2005 when the Government parked the Tomlinson proposals and drafted its own White Paper alternative. The Tomlinson Group had almost uniquely built a consensus for reform and as John Bangs of the NUT told the Committee, the apparent abandonment of Tomlinson left the profession dislocated from the Government's vision. The Committee agreed; "the disappointment many expressed after the Government decided not to fully implement the Tomlinson proposals has not yet dissipated." Despite the fact that Ministers have argued that they are implementing '90% of Tomlinson,' it's clear that his ghost still hovers. "We believe that the changes to the 14 - 19 curriculum would have been better structured and more coherent had Tomlinson's proposals been adopted."

Two other missed opportunities were highlighted by the Committee. One was the opportunity to reschedule the review of A levels so that they could be considered as part of the wider 14 - 19 landscape rather than as a separate piece of the jigsaw. The Education Secretary's response that they were committed to this by the White Paper appeared unconvincing to the Committee; "we would urge the Government to consider rescheduling the review." The other was the opportunity to create a single funding system to support 14 - 19 learning. Here the Committee took some comfort from the Education Secretary's response that this might be considered after the next Spending Review. That would make it 2011, arguably still possible to have in place before the entitlement takes effect in 2013.

The second theme is also one that has hovered over Diplomas for some time and is the lack of clarity as to just what they are. "A key issue," according to the Committee "and one which is at the heart of many of the debates surrounding them." The DfES have not found Diploma definition easy. A year ago, Lord Adonis



described them as “specialist vocational Diplomas,” the Schools Minister saw them as lurking ‘betwixt the academic and the vocational,’ the Education Secretary said they were not vocational in one sense but they were in another, the DfES originally described them as ‘specialised Diplomas’ but by the time of the recent Green Paper had gone for plain ‘Diplomas.’ The nearest the Committee got to a true explanation of Diplomas was when Jon Coles, the Director of 14 – 19 reform, gave a detailed illustration but over 16 lines of text. As the Committee noted, this was perhaps ‘an accurate description but was far from being media friendly.’ This is surely the key point. To a face book generation and a sceptical press, Diplomas need to be conceptually simple, appealing, high quality and able to lead somewhere. “They need to be able to sell themselves ” as the Committee said.

The third theme is about how far the very different approach to designing Diplomas, one based around employer led Partnerships, has worked. The Committee heard a lot of evidence peppered with the word ‘frustration.’ Some of the tensions were perhaps to be expected; a lack of time, a lack of guidance from on high, a failure to consult key partners notably awarding bodies, but some significant issues stand out as well. Firstly the “blank slate” approach adopted about existing similar qualifications that seem to be working pretty well, notably BTECs. The Committee welcomed the DfES commitment “not to abruptly withdraw existing vocational qualifications” but the relationship between Diplomas and related qualifications remains at best wary. Secondly some of the critical design issues appear unresolved, for example “there does not yet appear to be consensus on the issue of grading.” Thirdly some stakeholders, notably teachers and small employers, seem to have had “little direct involvement” and fourthly the whole thing is beginning to appear “unduly complex.”

The fourth theme is staff development. “Almost all the evidence we received stressed that there was still significant work to be done.” There was a lot of discussion about the 3 day training entitlement and about support being offered by other bodies but the Committee was concerned that some of the more complex issues such as ‘collaborative working’ were not being tackled. It called for “focused plans for specific, costed and timetabled actions” around such wider issues.

The fifth theme is collaborative working. Many are sympathetic to this idea but find that countervailing Government policies are making it more difficult. Unsurprisingly league tables cropped up a lot in this regard. The Committee’s view was that “if collaborative approaches are to become the norm, the Government needs to look at the mechanisms for recognising achievements in collaborative provision.” As to how far local area partnerships were ready and steady, the Committee found a mixed picture; some ‘have leapt at the challenge,’ others are ‘some way away.’ The Government is doing its bit by organising structured learning visits but the forthcoming NAO review of local partnerships looks to be important.

Finally, and perhaps unsurprisingly, the sixth theme appears to be ‘steady as she goes.’ The shadow of previous reform attempts hangs heavily over this reform and you can’t go far without someone pointing to the ‘scars’ of GNVQ or of Curriculum 2000. It’s in everybody’s interests to get things right for 14 – 19 year olds. So there was support for the Gateway process being ‘rigorous and setting high quality thresholds’ and for being ready to learn lessons from the pilots starting in 2008. “The Government needs to ensure that it is genuinely a pilot and if problems are not resolved or if further problems emerge, then the wider roll out should be delayed or reviewed.” Perhaps the most telling recommendation of all.

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