Vocational qualifications and progression to higher education: the case of the 14-19 Diplomas in the English system

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Abstract

Ensuring effective progression from vocational qualifications to higher education has become an important issue internationally as part of government strategies to raise skills levels and to provide more equitable access to tertiary level study. From September 2008 the Government in England has begun to introduce a new set of qualifications for 14-19 year olds, called Diplomas, intended to prepare young people for both employment and higher education. In competition with the traditional General Certificate of Education Advanced Levels, the reputation of the Diploma will depend on its ability to provide a progression route to university. Drawing on evidence from a variety of sources, including five seminars involving further education teachers, higher education admissions tutors and representatives of national agencies, this article suggests that the potential of the Diplomas to become a major route to higher education will be constrained by what we term a 'low uptake, low understanding, low recognition and high complexity syndrome'. Using historical sources, the article also points to key similarities between the new Diplomas and the earlier, ill-fated Advanced General National Vocational Qualifications as middle track awards in the English triple-track qualifications system. We conclude by suggesting two contrasting possible strategies to address this issue.

Key words – Vocational education, Diplomas, progression, higher education

Introduction

The role of full-time vocational programmes in providing access to higher education is of international interest for both economic and equity reasons (e.g. Pugsley, 2004; Field *et al.,* 2007, Hoelscher *et al.,* 2008). This issue has become an important focus of attention in the context of changing and declining apprenticeship systems and the increasing use of school and college-based vocational provision in upper secondary education (Wolf, 2002; Clarke and Winch, 2007). The growth of education-based vocational education and training and the expansion of higher education systems can be seen as part of state-sponsored strategies for the development of higher levels skills as governments are forced to act as a substitute for employer effort (Keep, 2005; Grubb and Lazerson, 2004).

The English education and training system provides a particular example of this approach, both because of its historic weaknesses in the provision of work-based education and training for young people and its growing reliance on school and college-based vocational programmes (Stasz and Wright, 2004). Successive governments in England have used qualifications reform as the main mechanism for expanding the vocational route (Fernandez and Hayward, 2004). There have been continuous attempts, since the early 1990s, to provide alternative broad vocational qualifications for access to higher education alongside the established academic route of subject-based General Certificate of Education (GCE) A Level qualifications (Gleeson and Hodkinson, 1995; Hodgson and Spours, 2008).

This article focuses on the latest in this long line of developments – the 14-19 Diplomas - which have been the major focus of government policy and investment in upper secondary education since 2005 and are being gradually introduced from September 2008. Designed at Foundation, Higher and Advanced Levels and covering 14 vocational and three general education 'Lines', they are conceived as one of the three major routes for 14-19 year olds (general, broad vocational, apprenticeships) at a time when the Government in England is raising the participation age to 18 by 2015 (DFES, 2007). Not only has the Government viewed the Diplomas as becoming a major vehicle for achieving its participation target, it has even gone as far as to state that it envisages the Diplomas becoming the qualification of choice for 14-19 year olds (DCSF, 2007).

In this article we focus on the emerging relationship between Advanced Level Diplomas and higher education because, while these qualifications are seen as having a dual function (promoting progression to both employment and higher education), in a triple-track qualifications system their status will be determined to a large extent by their ability to provide widespread access to a range of university courses and institutions. Using data from five seminars involving national agencies, sector skills and awarding bodies, further education providers and university admissions tutors, this article explores issues of progression between Diplomas and higher education. The evidence from these seminars and other recent research on the Diplomas undertaken at a relatively early stage in their development is examined within the broader historical and English education and training system context.

The 14-19 Diplomas

The Diplomas first emerged in 2005 as the main Government response to an independent enquiry into the 14-19 curriculum and qualifications system in England, known as the Tomlinson Review. The Tomlinson 14-19 Working Group (2004) recommended the creation of a unified diploma system covering all forms of learning for 14-19 year olds, which would absorb separate general and vocational qualifications. In effect this would have introduced a single framework to replace the triple-track qualifications system. The Government rejected

this radical proposal in its 14-19 White Paper (DfES, 2005), recommending instead the retention of General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSEs) and GCE A Levels. These awards were to be supplemented by the new Diplomas 'to provide a real alternative to traditional education and qualifications' (DfES, 2006a: 1).

While the Diplomas were intended to promote access to employment and higher education, employers via sector related Diploma Development Partnerships (DDPs) were given the lead role in their design. Following later ministerial announcements about the addition of three new general education Diplomas (DCSF 2007), 17 Diploma Lines will be offered by 2013. The first five – IT; Society, Health and Development; Engineering; Creative and Media; and Construction and the Built Environment – were available from September 2008. A further five – Environmental and Land-based Studies; Manufacturing and Product Design; Hair and Beauty Studies; Business Administration and Finance; and Hospitality - will be offered from September 2009. These will be joined by four further Lines – Public Services; Sport and Active Leisure; Retail Business and Travel and Tourism – in September 2010. The three additional, general Diploma Lines in Science; Languages and International Communication; and Humanities and Social Sciences will be introduced between September 2011 and 2012.

The 14 original Diplomas were described as 'composite awards' with a common basic design comprising three 'components': *Principal Learning*, which is sector-related and mandatory; *Generic Learning* which 'will ensure that all Diploma students cover common skills essential to successful learning and future employment'; and *Additional/Specialist Learning (ASL)*, which will vary according to Diploma Line, and consists of units and qualifications from the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), allowing learners 'to tailor their programme according to their interests and aspirations and may include further specialisation, or complementary studies' (DfES, 2006a: 10). Ministers intended that the Diplomas should provide 'an exciting, stretching and relevant programme of learning for young people of all backgrounds and abilities' (DfES, 2006b: 3) and should prepare them for life and work.

The size of the Diploma varies at the different levels, with Advanced Level deemed comparable to 3.5 GCE A Levels (Directogov, 2009) Unlike previous broad vocational qualifications, which had different variants for pre-16 and post-16 learners to recognise their different levels of maturity, the design of the Diplomas is the same whether they are taken by 14-16 or by 16-19 year olds. However, the majority of 14-16 year olds would be expected to be on Foundation or Higher programmes, with those at 16+ mainly taking Higher and Advanced Awards. While adhering to the overall Diploma template described above, each Line of Diplomas takes a different approach to content, based on vocational sector requirements as determined by the DDP appointed by the relevant Sector Skills Council (SSC) (see Ertl *et al.,* 2009). This we will see has had a major effect on how the Diplomas are viewed both by 14-19 education providers and by higher education admissions tutors.

All Diplomas contain both external and internal assessment, although the proportions of these vary according to Diploma Line and level. In order to achieve the Diploma, learners need to pass all three components (Principal, Generic and Additional/Specialist Learning). To recognise the importance of the Functional Skills of English, Mathematics and IT, passing the Diploma also includes gaining these three qualifications at the same level as the Diploma, except for Advanced Level where it is only necessary to gain Functional Skills at Higher Level.

The character of the Diplomas, and their ability to be understood by higher education tutors, are closely related to how they emerged in the policy process and how they have evolved since. As we have mentioned earlier, the Diplomas were a government response to the findings of the independent Tomlinson Working Group. Following the advice of those very close to Ministers, the Tomlinson unified diploma framework was subject to 'cherry-picking'

rather than being adopted in its totality. Policy-makers borrowed its name (the diploma) and some of its key design features (e.g. the idea of a composite award made up of different types of learning, the inclusion of Functional Skills and the idea of a Project). However, the Diploma was set alongside existing qualifications rather than subsuming them as part of an overarching common award. For this reason, the Diploma could be seen as a political compromise or, as some have commented more bluntly, a 'huge fudge' (Richmond and Freedman, 2009).

In the situation in which Diplomas coexist with other qualifications, the Government decided that the only way in which they could compete with GCE A Levels was by downplaying their vocational and stressing their general education function. Their name, for example, was changed from 'Specialised Diplomas' in 2005 to 'Diplomas' in March 2007, the amount of external assessment was increased to align them more closely with academic awards and considerable effort was put into gaining university acceptance, including the appointment of higher education 'champions' (DCSF 2006c). The remorseless academic drift of Diplomas from being a broad vocational award to becoming an applied and general qualification was further confirmed by the development of the three Diploma Lines in general subjects. This latter development was considered by education policy actors we interviewed in 2007 as representing a degree of political accommodation of the Tomlinson agenda by the new Secretary of State, Ed Balls, as part of Prime Minister Gordon Brown's new Premiership. Reservations about the practicality and function of these new general Diploma Lines were put aside by sections of the education profession, relieved that Diplomas were no longer associated simply with an alternative vocational education track (see Hodgson and Spours, 2008).

The result of the constant discussion about the function of Diplomas in the first three years of their development and implementation and the differences between the 17 Lines, each of which has been developed separately, is that these qualifications lack a clear identity. This problem of confusion about the role and purpose of the new awards was a point made forcefully by the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee report (HoC, 2007). We will see later in this article that this issue continues to be echoed by further and higher education practitioners.

GNVQs and the 14-19 Diplomas – history repeating itself?

Diplomas at Advanced Level are being introduced alongside A Levels, which have traditionally been the main route into university, and Apprenticeships, which are closely associated with the work-based route and are estimated to account for between two and four per cent of those accessing higher education (Seddon, 2005). In previous work we have referred to the Diploma as being a 'middle track' qualification (Hodgson and Spours, 2007), lying between these two principal routes, in what we have described as a triple track qualifications system (Hodgson and Spours, 1997). In this location Diplomas also find themselves competing with established vocational qualifications, such as Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) National Diplomas, which are extensively offered in further education colleges and, to a lesser extent, in schools or sixth form colleges and which over the last two decades have provided a steady flow of candidates into parts of the English higher education system (HEFCE, 2007).

Diplomas are not the first government initiative designed to create a vocational alternative to GCE A Levels. Previous attempts include the development of the General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) in the early 1990s, which at Advanced Level, was remodelled to become the Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education (AVCE) in 2000. Both these awards had relatively short lifespans, eight and four years respectively which suggests that they could be judged as policy failures. While about half of those successfully

completing Advanced Level GNVQs progressed to higher education (O'Connor, 1997), they nevertheless constituted a very small part of the overall cohort of 16-19 year olds entering higher education. An historical examination of government-sponsored, middle-track qualifications, indicates that their likely take-up and success, particularly at Advanced Level, is decided early on in their development, hence our desire to examine the Diplomas at this early stage. They have also tended to evolve into lower status general awards (FEDA et al., 1997), rather than being regarded as strong vocational qualifications. Here we focus on comparisons with Advanced GNVQ because, unlike the BTEC Diploma, it was a national government initiative conceived on a similar scale to the Diplomas (see Figure 1)

(Figure 1 around here)

The qualifications comparisons highlighted in Figure 1 suggest that Advanced GNVQs and Advanced Level Diplomas share several key features as flagship government initiatives intended to raise levels of full-time participation to post-16 education and training in the context of a triple-track qualifications system. It was these combined features which determined which learners took the award and which shaped the relationship between the Advanced GNVQ and higher education. We will argue that they are also likely to determine the future for the Advanced Diplomas as a route to university.

During the 1990s, academics commented on the difficult position facing Advanced GNVQs:

> *Because GNVQs developed first and foremost as an alternative route to HE, the question of parity of esteem with the A level pathway remained a central concern.* (Hodkinson and Mattison, 1994: 114).

However, the award struggled to achieve this parity because of the political emphasis on GCE A Levels.

> *Constant talk of A level as the 'gold standard' has set GNVQ a difficult cultural and educational task…GNVQ must establish a credible vocational middle track. (*Gleeson and Hodkinson, 1995: 9)

The basic structure of the English qualifications system has not significantly changed over the last decade and the pressures from GCE A Levels on a new qualification remain considerable. However, Diplomas do have some different features from GNVQs, making them potentially more attractive to higher education providers. At Advanced Level, the full Diploma is equivalent to 3.5 GCE A Levels, compared to GNVQs two A Level equivalency. They have the capacity more explicitly to mix general and vocational learning, can be more individually tailored to learner interest and have a more overarching and programmatic approach than their predecessors. However, as we will see, these features do not appear to have significantly affected the sceptical attitude of many higher education tutors. In 1995, they were demanding a GCE A Level to accompany a GNVQ and many are effectively demanding the same in 2009 by suggesting that an A Level must form part of a student's Diploma programme, which is possible within its design as part of ASL.

Both GNVQs and Diplomas have been recognised as supporting innovative pedagogies and developing broad skills, but both have been strongly affected by their co-existence with A Levels. It would appear that the middle track location of the Diplomas will determine the type of students studying them as long as GCE A Levels remain the dominant qualification and are predominantly used by selector universities. Furthermore, BTEC is much more of a competitor in 2009 than it was in 1995, with nearly 62,000 students on Level 3 programmes (HEFCE, 2007), with several other qualifications attracting a significant minority of 16-19 year olds, for example City and Guilds and OCR awards, the International Baccalaureate and the Cambridge Pre-U. The market position of Diplomas, therefore, is far more

precarious than that facing the GNVQ because of a crowded landscape of other general and vocational qualifications.

In addition, rises in GCE A Level attainment, combined with restrictions in public expenditure have led to a scramble for university places in 2009 (BBC, 2009a), which is likely to continue in a period of recession. This imbalance between supply and demand for higher education is not a good environment in which to introduce a new qualification. Taken together, external and structural factors threaten to overshadow the internal and distinctive design features of Diplomas – their size, tariff rating and potential pedagogical benefits. This complex situation, with its historical parallels, provides the context for assessing current research on the 14-19 Diplomas and their emerging relationship with higher education.

Diplomas and progression to higher education – the evidence to date

In this section of the article we summarise a range of evidence - a recent report on the relationship between Diplomas and higher education (Richardson and Haynes, 2009); data from UCAS, including statements on university websites regarding recognition of the Diplomas, and the House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Skills report on the 14-19 Diplomas (HoC 2007). We also draw on a number of press reports. These are supplemented by recent findings from a series of five seminars held at the Institute of Education, University of London, in the summer of 2009. The purpose of this seminar series was to discuss and explore emerging evidence on the scope for progression from each of the first five Diploma Lines – IT; Society, Health and Development; Engineering; Creative and Media; and Construction and the Built Environment – onto higher education courses. Each of the seminars focused on one Diploma Line. In addition to the sponsors and organisers (the Linking London Lifelong Learning Network and the Institute of Education), the seminars involved an invited set of participants from the relevant SSCs and industry professional bodies, from national awarding bodies, from UCAS and from higher and further education providers in London. All but one of the university representatives came from post-1992 (ex-polytechnic) universities. While several constituencies were represented in the seminar, the participants shared a desire to facilitate learner progression from the Diplomas to higher education courses. In total, over 50 people took part in least one of the five seminars, some attending on more than one occasion. Detailed notes were taken at each of these events and these, together with a summary of the main issues raised, were subsequently circulated to all participants for comment and correction.

Early messages

As early as 2007 mixed messages were emerging regarding university recognition of the Diplomas. As part of the evidence submitted to the House of Commons Education and Skills Enquiry into the 14-19 Diplomas, Ken Boston, then Chief Executive of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, reported 'immense interest' by vice chancellors (VCs) in the Diplomas, but added that normally hard-headed VCs had a record of issuing 'warm and fuzzy' statements (HoC, 2007: Q83). At the same time, other evidence began to sound alarm bells as to which universities would recognise the Diplomas.

> *With regard to support from higher education, the union Amicus…told us that they were "getting indications that only the former polytechnic universities will take it [the Diploma] seriously in terms of UCAS tariff."* (HoC, 2007: para 169)

Two years later the position of universities on the Diplomas is better known, even though the first Advanced Diploma learner cohort is yet to apply for higher education courses. On the

surface, recognition of Diplomas looks widespread with the Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) proclaiming that the 'Diplomas are already winning strong support from universities' (DCSF, 2009). UCAS (2009) states:

> *Of the UK institutions listed by UCAS as offering higher education (HE) courses, the vast majority have written and provided a generic statement reflecting their position on accepting the Advanced Diploma as a route onto their undergraduate courses.*

Closer scrutiny of university statements published on the UCAS website, however, suggests a more complex and partial picture. While 80 per cent of courses would be prepared to count a Diploma towards the entry requirement, the figures are significantly lower (40%) for the prestigious universities (BBC, 2009b) and the statements reveal a catalogue of caveats. They can be seen on a continuum from acceptance to rejection. Most enthusiastic are post-1992 institutions, which have a strong tradition of accepting students from vocational routes.

> *Middlesex University welcomes applications from students who are taking the new Advanced and Progression Diploma qualifications…The University regards the Advanced (level 3) Diplomas as an equivalent qualification to AGCE and AVCE and therefore satisfying the general entrance requirements for entry to an appropriate undergraduate programme.*

The largest group, however, comprises those universities who will 'consider' an application from a Diploma student. These include many of the established and more prestigious 'pre-1992 universities'.

> *Applicants who successfully achieve the new Advanced Diploma (level 3) will be considered for entry onto Warwick degrees in closely related subjects. To meet the standard entry requirements applicants may need to take specific Additional and Specialised Learning options. The whole applicant profile will be taken into consideration and judged on its own merit.*

As we can see from the example above, typical of this type of university, statements normally send two messages to applicants. First, acceptance will depend on taking other qualifications as part of ASL within the Diploma and, second, all applications will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

The Universities of Oxford and Cambridge take a more restrictive approach still by stating that they will consider Diplomas only for courses in Engineering, providing candidates have GCE A Level Physics and an award such as Mathematics for Engineering. Finally, there are those who reject the Diploma outright. Imperial College states:

> *The present restriction on the Additional Specialist Learning element to the equivalent of 1.5 A levels means that the Diploma does not contain sufficient academic content to demonstrate that Diploma award holders could cope with the academic requirements of our engineering courses. Thus, the Advanced Engineering Diploma as currently defined does not by itself provide a normal entry route to our engineering courses.*

All universities, regardless of their standing, state that Diplomas might provide progression to 'appropriate' programmes which, in fact, could be a confined range of courses in vocational subjects. The statements to date do not convey the message that the Diploma is a passport to a wide range of university provision. Nor do they communicate the textured thinking of admissions tutors responsible for different types of higher education courses that has proved crucial in relation to previous new qualifications (e.g. Hodgson, *et al.*, 2005).

Prior to the majority of these statements being published on university websites, the University of Exeter and the National Foundation for Education Research (NFER) undertook a survey of 19 higher education institutions representative of the English higher education sector as a whole (Richardson and Haynes, 2009). They surveyed both key senior managers and 62 admissions tutors. Their findings provide a useful explanation for the range of statements exemplified above. While awareness of Diplomas among higher education managers was reported as being 'widespread', the researchers noted that admissions tutors were less knowledgeable about the Diplomas and many of those surveyed were not familiar with the details of the new qualifications. The report can be seen to have four main findings. First, universities of all types welcomed 'the breadth of learning inherent in Diplomas and their potential to widen participation' (1). Second, there was a difference between what the authors refer to as 'research intensive institutions' (pre-1992) and 'teaching-led institutions' (post-1992). The former 'are more likely to examine closely the academic rigour of Diploma content and less likely to assume that Diploma study will turn out to have been adequate preparation for HE entry' (1). The researchers went on to report low levels of internal support for Diplomas in these institutions, citing responses such as 'degrees of scepticism', 'cautious', 'a way to go' and 'quite cynical' (33). Teaching-led institutions, on the other hand 'showed a high level of internal support for the Diplomas…and these HEIs are more likely to assume Diploma applicants will be recruited in 2010, across lines of learning' (1). Third, while Diplomas will be judged in terms of UCAS points, the majority of higher education institutions 'anticipate specifying Additional and/or Specialist Learning, most commonly in the form of attainment in an A Level subject' (1). Finally, senior managers highlighted the importance of recruiting highly motivated and successful students and stressed the central importance of the 'quality of Diploma holders' (33) in the first three years of Diploma development. However, this latter point relies on schools and colleges advising high attaining students to take the Diplomas and this is not assured. Surveys of teachers and further education lecturers in 2007 regarding their views about the Diplomas suggested that the majority did not think Diplomas would offer a genuinely high quality alternative to GCSEs and A Levels (Edge Foundation, 2007) and the National Audit Office (2007) confirmed this view.

Taken together this early evidence regarding the Advanced Diploma points to broad support in principle but with critical differences in attitude from different parts of the higher education sector. In the following section we comment on more recent evidence from both higher education tutors and further education providers both of whom, as we have seen, will shape the reputation, credibility and uptake of the Diploma in the crucial coming period.

Findings from the 'Diplomas and Progression to HE' seminar series

Deliberations at the seminars revealed that there were a number of issues for progression to higher education which are common to all five Diploma Lines, although each of the Lines has its own specific set of concerns. During the seminars, the common and Line specific issues reported below were articulated and recognised by all parties present. It was not the case that further education tutors took a significantly different view from their higher education counterparts. Even those representing national bodies involved in developing and promoting the Diplomas appreciated the points being raised and the challenges facing the new awards. From the first seminar, participants recognised the ambivalence of the UCAS statements – that prestigious universities and courses in high demand were more ambivalent about using Diplomas in their admissions process. This position is likely to become more entrenched because of the increasing numbers of highly qualified young people wishing to progress to university in a period of recession. In sections of higher education there appeared to be a considerable willingness to make the Diplomas a success, not least for the 'present brave cohort of Diploma students'. However, looking back over the seminars as a whole, an

emerging logic became evident which we term here - 'a low uptake, low understanding, low recognition and high complexity syndrome' – and which threatens to constrain the progression capacity of the Diplomas.

Low initial uptake of Diplomas at Advanced Level - Ministers originally expected that 40,000 learners would elect to take the Diploma in September 2008. In the event only 12,000 did so and of these only 1,200 embarked on an Advanced Level course (Richardson and Haynes 2009). The low uptake was defended by Ministers on the grounds of promoting 'quality', but commentary in the media and elsewhere has viewed the small numbers as a setback for the Diploma (e.g. In the News, 2008; Guardian, 2009). The limited presence of the Diplomas in their first year was a constant source of comment by participants in the seminars. Even if most Diploma participants successfully completed their courses and a significant proportion sought to progress to higher education, the actual numbers would still only represent a tiny fraction of university applicants. In 2007, 454,000 UK-domiciled applicants applied through UCAS to full-time study in higher education (Pring *et al.,* 2009: 150) and applicants with Diplomas in the coming years might number low thousands at best. Furthermore, there are different levels of participation in the different Lines, with some having proved more popular than others. Universities are unlikely, therefore, to see certain types of Advanced Diplomas at all in the coming years. Nor can it be assumed at this stage that 14-16 year olds taking a Higher Level Diploma will boost the presence of the Advanced Diploma post-16, because these learners might opt for a variety of qualifications at this stage.

Low understanding of the Diploma – while both higher education admissions tutors and further education providers have had access to a great deal of publicity about the Diplomas, nevertheless they have been finding it hard to understand what they are, the capacities they will develop in learners and how they relate to existing qualifications such as GCE A Levels and BTEC National Diplomas. Diplomas are intended to provide a broad introduction to a 'sector', which might cover a wide range of occupations. For example, the Creative and Media Diploma covers 20 different vocational areas from dance to shoemaking. Furthermore, Diplomas were designed to absorb other more recognisable brands of qualifications as part of the learner's ASL. This could be a GCE A Level or a number of BTEC or NVQ units. As we have also seen, the Diploma has been renamed and its purpose continually discussed since it was first announced. It came of no surprise, therefore, that Diplomas were seen by participants as complex qualifications with multiple functions, containing many different parts and designed to appeal to different groups of students seeking different pathways of progression. This was contrasted with established qualifications, particularly GCE A Levels, which have more limited functions and have a simple, single-subject design. BTEC Diplomas, which are also grouped awards, are more easily understood than the Diplomas because they are more vocationally specific and are usually tied to particular occupations. Given the small number of anticipated Advanced Level Diploma graduates in the coming years, detailed knowledge and understanding of the Diploma among university admissions tutors and those responsible for selection to specific courses is likely to increase only slowly.

Low recognition of the Diploma as a valuable whole award – in the context of low up-take and low understanding, the seminar participants kept referring to Diplomas by comparing them with competing and better known qualifications or in terms of the UCAS tariff points score. This risks the potential learning benefits of the Diplomas being overlooked. When HE admissions tutors considered what they had required in the past, they mentioned two things – the rigour of GCE A Levels (e.g. in maths) or the practical skills and work-related experience and specialism that came through BTEC National Diplomas. This may mean that the distinguishing features of the Diploma, which are designed to help prepare young people for undergraduate study (e.g. research skills developed through the extended project, personal learning and thinking skills or the functional skills), may not be properly recognised

as discussion continues to be focused on points of comparison with competitor qualifications and in terms which tend to disadvantage the Diplomas.

Moreover, because the Diploma as a holistic programme is not well understood and certain aspects will be less relevant than others for some higher education courses, there was a concern that admissions tutors would 'cherry-pick' components of the Diploma, thus devaluing it as a whole award. A case in point is the Creative and Media Diploma. Admissions tutors admitted that they would be prepared to accept learners for certain courses, for example Fine Art, even if they had not passed all the Functional Skills elements, because these were not seen as vital to success on the course. On the other hand, these same tutors indicated that the Diploma in itself would not be enough for entry to Fine Art and related subjects because they would also need to base their judgement on a portfolio of student work. The reputation of the Diplomas, according to other admissions tutors, appeared to rest in many cases on learners' achievements in only one component - ASL. For Engineering Degrees, for example, higher education tutors explained that students would be expected to include as part of their ASL either a Mathematics A Level or the newly created unit in Mathematics for Engineering, which was specifically designed for this Diploma, to be successful in their application.

Conversely, participants raised an emerging dilemma about how to recognise the achievement of those who failed to successfully complete all elements of the Diploma. On the one hand, it is important to maintain the integrity of the award as a whole if it is to gain credibility as a recognised and valued qualification. On the other, there is a risk of high levels of failure (and thus failure to gain entry to higher education courses) if students are not given credit for the elements they do achieve and are penalised for failing specific aspects (e.g. the Functional Skills).

Finally, there is a major issue in relation to ASL units. A strong theme coming from the further education providers was the problem of offering a wide range of ASL units and awards as a result of the small size of the Diploma cohort. The difficulties for schools, colleges and consortia in delivering a wide programme is compounded by the costs of some of the ASL units, which require specialist equipment and facilities, for example those related to construction and engineering. Yet it is the ASL component of the Diplomas, as we have seen, which are highlighted as important in many of the higher education statements.

Over and above the common issues we have described so far, there were a number of additional areas of concern related to each of the first five Lines. Examples of these are described briefly below.

- *Society, Health and Development* – participants in this seminar reported a relatively positive response from admissions tutors and a recognition of the value of the team-working skills and qualities promoted by the Extended Project. However, the major discussion was about the role of Foundation and Higher Diplomas in satisfying the demand for lower level jobs in the National Health Service. It was not clear how the Advanced Diploma would constitute a significant route to higher education in this sector.

- *Engineering* **–** while a great deal of effort has been expended nationally to promote the Engineering Diploma (regarded as the 'academic' flagship of the Diploma Lines), there is a strongly established `community of practice' within the engineering sector, which tends to make it harder to implement changes to popular established progression routes recognised by employers, learners and parents. The Advanced Diploma in this area could be squeezed out by traditional qualifications such as GCE A levels and BTECs and sought-after programmes such as Advanced Apprenticeships.

- *Creative and Media* **–** this Diploma with its 20 disciplines representing activity across a very broad sector poses a different kind of problem. Sections of higher education, for example those offering the performing arts, have appreciated and recognised BTEC National with its strong record of practical performance. Universities are not necessarily convinced that a sector-based Diploma will provide sufficient practical preparation for performance-based higher education courses.

- *IT* - the specification drawn up for the Advanced Diploma is very different from existing GCE A Level, BTEC and City & Guilds qualifications and concentrates on the business use of IT, including a strong element of project planning and development. According to seminar participants there are broadly two contrasting views of the Diploma within higher education. Pre-1992 universities do not regard it as providing the best possible preparation for those wishing to study for a degree in computer sciences, where they would prefer to take students with GCE A Levels in subjects such as Mathematics and Physics. Post-1992 universities see it as highly compatible with business technology courses. However, universities offering these courses are accustomed to taking students with little or no relevant background or experience, which means there is a risk of duplication of learning in the first year of degree study.

- *Construction and the Built Environment* – the most pressing issue in relation to this Diploma appears to be a dislocation between how schools/colleges and universities see it. Participants at the seminar commented that many schools/colleges stress the 'craft' side of the Diploma and view it as best suited to very practically oriented students. Universities, on the other hand, consider it as a route to professions such as surveying, which value more theoretical aspects. According to this evidence, the extent to which this Diploma will provide a strong progression route into higher education, therefore, has to be questioned.

Taken together, the common and Line specific points raised by seminar participants highlight the complexity of the relationship of the Diplomas and higher education. The textured picture revealed by these seminars is thus possibly more concerning than the initial wider evidence about progression from Diplomas to higher education would suggest.

Conclusion

The historical evidence about the fate of government-sponsored middle-track qualifications, in particular the Advanced Level GNVQ, together with the contemporary discussions and debates around the Advanced Level Diploma, suggest that history is likely to repeat itself. Advanced Level Diplomas may well suffer the same fate as their predecessors and fail to become a major route into higher education. As we have argued, some of the design features of the Diplomas and the context in which they are being implemented are somewhat different from those that surrounded GNVQ. However, the key contextual issue continues to dominate – the position of the Diploma as a middle-track qualification in a triple-track qualifications system, situated alongside more attractive and recognised alternative qualifications, such as GCE A Levels and BTEC National awards, of which the latter has gradually established a niche for itself over a period of 25 years.

The Exeter/NFER study (Richardson and Haynes, 2009) stressed the widespread recognition by higher education representatives of the potential positive effects of Diploma design. However, taking into consideration historical and contemporary evidence, these internal features may not be able compensate for problems of the Diplomas' middle track location. Moreover, these qualities make the Diploma complex and difficult to understand, a

point also highlighted in the seminar series. The Advanced Level Diploma was unfavourably contrasted with the simplicity and clear purpose of other awards. These difficulties have been compounded by the shifting debate about what the Diploma is – a vocational or an applied or a general qualification - a point eloquently captured in the House of Commons report (HoC, 2007).

Previous research on the relationship between 14-19 qualifications and higher education notes both the innate conservatism of higher education providers in relation to new qualifications and the important interaction between the views of professionals in schools and colleges and those of their higher education colleagues in determining the value and credibility of new awards. Higher education tutors do not make up their minds about new qualifications in isolation from those preparing young people for university (Hodgson *et al.*, 2005; Wilde and Wright, 2007). The overall evidence to date suggests a mutually reinforcing process between initial low uptake, low understanding and low recognition of a complex product in a triple-track system with different types of market leaders in both general and vocational education. This context will undermine the ability of the Diplomas to attract large numbers of students with a wide range of ability. The combined effects of strong, constraining, external, structural factors and weak, internal, promoting factors indicate that Diplomas are, therefore, unlikely to break out of the traditional constrained higher education progression patterns of non-general education awards that have been highlighted in previous research (e.g. Seddon, 2005; Wilde and Hoeschel, 2007; Hoeschel *et al*., 2008).

This leads to a final question as to how to prevent history repeating itself and how to rescue the Diploma from the syndrome in which it finds itself. In our view there are two possible diametrically opposed solutions to this dilemma. The first, and the most obvious, is to make the Diploma more specifically vocational in order to clarify its identity and function. However, this solution is fraught with dangers. Given the way the Diploma is being introduced into the pre-16 school and college curriculum, such a move would confirm it as a lower status qualification. Moreover, the rebadged Diploma would then be located in exactly the same territory as established BTEC, OCR and City and Guilds Awards, thus begging the question of 'Why have Diplomas at all?' The other option would be to make the Diploma a genuinely unifying overarching framework, along the lines originally proposed by the Tomlinson 14-19 Working Group, in which GCE A Levels, BTEC Diplomas and other awards would become its constituent parts rather than its competitors. The political moment for this second solution may well have passed, but it does not make it any the less relevant in the current context.

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Figure 1. Features of Advanced GNVQs and Advanced Diplomas compared

Feature	Advanced GNVQ	Advanced Diplomas
1. Participation	Intended to raise participation and to respond to previous rises in full-time participation Initial high up-take with a total of 19,540 Advanced Level students by 1996 (OFSTED 1998)	Intended to be a major contributor towards raising the participation age Initial low up-take by students (2008/9), presently 1,200 students at Advanced Level (Richardson and Haynes 2009)
2. Role and purpose	Dual function – to aid progression to employment and higher education.	Dual function – to aid progression to employment and higher education.
3. Policy aim	Seen as school version of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) in triple-track system. Parity of esteem a major aim	Seen as way of overcoming the academic/vocational divide. Parity of esteem a major aim
4. Location in qualifications system	Middle track between GCE A Levels and NVQs. A Levels being redesigned to become more academically rigorous. Seen as school-based alternative to BTEC awards.	Middle track between GCE A Levels and NVQs/Apprenticeships. A Levels being redesigned to become more academically rigorous. BTEC awards more established in schools.
5. Organisation	GNVQs seen as way for schools offer broad vocational provision. Evidence of limited institutional collaboration to deliver GNVQs.	Considerable policy emphasis on partnership schools, colleges and work-based learning providers to deliver all the Diploma Lines.
6. Design	Broad vocational qualification aligned with A Levels to allow for mixed programmes Advanced Level equivalent to 2 A Levels.	Composite applied qualification in which A Levels can be taken as ASL units within the framework of the Diploma. Advanced Level equivalent to 3.5 A Levels.
7. Mode of learning and identity	Seen as a practical alternative to A Levels but increasingly 'pulled' in an academic direction, leading eventually to the 'new model' GNVQ, the Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education (AVCE).	Initially designed as vocationally stronger than GNVQ, but subsequently re-labelled as a general and applied qualification, to sit alongside A Levels.
8. Progression patterns	Advanced Level GNVQ used mainly for progression to certain sections of higher education.	Initial expectation that Advanced Diplomas will be used mainly for progression to certain sections of higher education.
9. Reaction of universities	Broadly welcomed by higher education but with caveats from admissions tutors.	Broadly welcomed by higher education but with caveats from admissions tutors.