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Kitchener, David A.. "The 14-19 Diplomas and universities. A marriage of convenience?." (2008). *Education: Seminars*. Paper 2. http://digitalcommons.bolton.ac.uk/ed_seminars/2

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The 14-19 Diplomas and universities. A marriage of convenience?

Edge Hill University Research Exchange Seminar Series.

October 2008

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ABSTRACT. *The Diplomas being introduced from September 2008 will soon need to be carefully evaluated as an entry qualification to university. They represent a move towards a more competency based structure of assessment with an attempt to provide a link between preparing for employment, skill acquisition and more traditional academic study. Such a wide remit it is argued provides significant pedagogical challenges for universities particularly as the Advanced Diploma is to be accredited as an equivalent to three and a half A-levels. It is suggested the change might create a new shift towards training which raises challenging questions as to how universities might reappraise their approaches to teaching and learning. The ambitious timescale for their implementation is noted and the ideological context which is felt to be driven by government perceived economic imperatives is briefly outlined.*

Keywords: Diplomas, education and training, assessment, competency-led

Introduction

This paper will examine potential pedagogical issues for universities arising from the introduction of the 14-19 Diplomas. The first five 14-19 Diplomas begin in September 2008 with seventeen choices planned to be available by 2013. The Advanced Diploma is to be accredited as an equivalent to three and a half A-levels and will therefore be considered as an entry qualification to university by 2010. For those unable to complete the full award there will be a progression Diploma equivalent to two and a half a levels. Their introduction perhaps represents a diluted version of *The Tomlinson Report* (DfES, 2004) and A-levels will remain. Their introduction creates two big challenges for universities: to what extent will candidates with one Advanced Diploma or one Progression Diploma be prepared for undergraduate study and secondly do we need to reappraise the content and assessment criteria of our degrees to better match the pedagogies experienced by the innovation? This paper suggests the crux of the challenge is responding to an emerging tension between the paradigms of education and training.

Structure and Delivery

The general structure of the Diplomas is to blend vocational study via work experience with more traditional academic approaches. They reflect an attempt to address one of the main concerns of *Leitch Review of Skills* (2006) that many young people are underprepared for employment. Hopkin (2007) however notes the 'conundrum' that 70% of the working population of 2020 will have completed their compulsory school education but HE policies targets 18-30 year olds. The breadth and curriculum choices of the full range of Diplomas could not be provided by a single institution, timetabling will therefore be a complex affair with schools entering into consortia agreements with other providers such as further education colleges, training providers, other schools and employers agreements with children being bussed to a variety of settings. This might prove to be especially problematical for young people living in rural settings, the DCSF (2008) report noting only 29% of children living in rural areas were within 15 minutes of their local school which might even mean boarding provision for some. It would appear too that a significant number of head teachers appear to be struggling with the new

arrangements with 35% still to enter into formal arrangements with businesses and schools (Shepherd, 2008). Interestingly, 56% in the same survey expressed as 'unacceptable' the perception of an increased social services role the change will entail. Wilks (2008) also suggests schools are under-prepared, a useful warning to the HE sector to plan ahead in detail.

There are three levels to the qualification:

1. The Foundation Diploma, which takes broadly the same time to do as four or five GCSEs and can be started in Year 10 or above.
2. The Higher Diploma, which takes broadly the same time to do as five or six GCSEs and can be started in Year 10 or above.
3. The Advanced Diploma, which is equivalent to three and a half A-levels and can be started in Year 12 or above.

The Advanced Diploma could lead to college, university or to skilled employment as could the Progression Diploma which takes broadly the same time as two A-levels which can be chosen with a smaller programme to combine a Diploma with another qualification. A larger Extended Diploma will be available at all three levels from 2011 and at Level 3 is likely to be equivalent to four and a half A-levels subject to confirmation through the tariff process (UCAS, 2008a).

The timetable for implementation is ambitious and universities will need to rapidly consider the implications:

From 2008

- Construction and the Built Environment
- Creative and Media
- Engineering
- Information and Technology
- Society, health and Development

From 2009

- Business, Administration and Finance
- Hair and Beauty
- Land-based Environmental
- Hospitality and Catering
- Manufacturing and product Design

From 2010

- Public Services
- Retail
- Sport and Leisure
- Travel and Tourism

From 2011

- Humanities
- Science
- Languages

The broad subject areas hint at one of the challenges facing universities, how to meet the developmental needs of students achieving a 3 and a half A-level equivalent in one area at Advanced Diploma level in that they are so very different to the 3 specialisms brought by the 3 A-level student. Also, the Diplomas will have a significant competency-based assessment criteria reflecting the vocational element of the qualification which to an extent replaces traditional essay writing A-level assessments. This change in emphasis has created much disquiet and criticism from both academics and industry. Smithers and Robinson (2008) were concerned the Diplomas would be insufficient for university entrance and they would be mainly assessed internally. They also pointed to a concern previously noted by the author, (Kitchener, 2008), that they perpetuated a divide between academic and vocational approaches reminiscent of the selective grammar school/secondary modern model. Lambert (2008) in a press statement from the CBI reiterated support for Diplomas such as hospitality or engineering as beneficial for industries but were concerned that the humanities, languages and sciences would not have any greater value to employers than the existing GCSEs or A-levels. Taubman (2000) wondered whether the new arrangements organised and overseen by the then new Learning and Skills Councils would create a 'dumping ground' in further education for the less academic. Ainley et al (2000) envisaged pathways of learning shaped by social groups defined by ethnicity, class and ability. Mackney (2002) felt within further education contexts a tertiary tripartism was being created: 'tertiary grammars (6FCs); technicals (CoVES); and moderns (General FE). If he is correct, it is possible that the arbitrary pre/post 1992 university divide could be further exacerbated by 'vocational' versus 'academic' selection and a similar model created by default. UCAS (2008b) however in a survey of 309 member institutions report a largely favourable response to the Diplomas though the Russell Group are a little less enthusiastic. Curtis (2008a) reports the private school sector will ignore the Diplomas and concentrate on traditional academic qualifications plus the international baccalaureates and the Cambridge University Pre-U, potential there again for a vocational/academic divide between universities. However, to conclude this section, perceptions of such a divide can arguably be based upon intellectual snobbery, academia being concerned superior to vocationalism.

The Ideological Context

The Diplomas are another small piece in the widening and increased HE participation jigsaw. The growth in higher education numbers has been rapid and reflects to an extent the recognition by universities of the worth of vocational qualifications. It is remarkable that the first A Level exams were held in 1951 and there were only 36,677 candidates; by 1985 the comparable figure had increased tenfold to 379,503 (DES, *Higginson Report*, 1988:47). The A Level exam was developed with not more than 10% of the population in

mind but by 1995 44% of young people up to the age of 21 had obtained two A Levels or vocational equivalents and the national target for the year 2000 was 60% (Dearing, 1996, para. 8.5). The Statistical First Release (SFR) produced by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) notes a remarkable total number of HE enrolments at English HEIs of 1,957,195 in 2006/07, an increase of 1% from 2005/06. Postgraduate enrolments increased by 2% and undergraduate enrolments increased by 1% between 2005/06 and 2006/07. It is possible the Diplomas will further encourage young people to apply to universities and raise participation rates even higher.

Behind this growth is arguably an economic imperative, the perceived requirement to further enhance nationally work-related skills to improve the competitiveness of British industry. The executive summary of *Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances* (DfES, 2006, p.1) has this as its first point; “*Our future as a prosperous nation depends on our education and training system*” though it later does acknowledge the changes should also include “*personal fulfilment, community development and the love of learning.*” The following two quotes taken from *Developing workforce Skills: Piloting a New Approach* (Public Enquiry Unit, 2002) succinctly illustrates the government’s position:

- 1.4 There is a well established relationship between improvements in skills and increased productivity, supported by both theoretical and empirical research. Growth theory suggests that human capital is one of the prime determinants of labour productivity. Human capital is increased by formal education and training and by learning-through-doing. Growth is centrally driven by the accumulation or stock of human capital, which also, through the embodiment of technical knowledge, provides the basis for innovation.
- 1.7. Research examining the causes of international productivity performance suggests that differing levels of skills play an important role. For example, estimates have been presented which suggest that between half and all of the UK productivity gap with Germany can be explained by skills differences.

Perhaps the most illuminating phrase is “Human capital is increased by formal education and training and by learning-through-doing” and here we have the rationale for the Diplomas with an emphasis upon the acquisition of skills to enhance employability. The concept espoused by such humanistic pioneers as R.S. Peters as education and training to be two separate entities has been replaced by a more pragmatic approach.

Education or training?

The Diplomas therefore will have a strong element of practically based learning and competency assessed criteria. Traditional university academic approaches such as comprehensive literature searches, critiques and reviews, essay based assignments, the application of Harvard conventions, methodological enquiries and formal lectures etc will be new or underdeveloped concepts for the newly Diploma qualified undergraduate

entrants, their pedagogical experiences having been significantly different to their predecessors and also to their peers entering via the A-level route. Students being accepted onto undergraduate programmes with a competency-led entry qualification is not a new phenomenon for universities who rightly recognise a diverse range of qualifications though such acceptance and recognition create new challenges. For example, at my own university, a survey of withdrawal from study measured against highest qualification level at entry revealed the highest drop-out rate was with NVQ level 3 students partly because of a mismatch between their previous competency-led learning experience and their university course demands which included new skills as outlined above. Their departure from the course was not therefore a lack of ability but rather an inability within the university framework to have their skills recognised. It must also be accepted the newly qualified Diploma student will represent a significant proportion of the 2010 undergraduate cohort. Jim Knight, the schools minister responsible for Diplomas, indicated an expectation of 30,000 young people (scaled down from an original estimate of 40,000) would take-up the qualification from September 2008 (Curtis, 2008b) and with 17 Diplomas available from 2011 student numbers will be significant.

The government do not see the Diplomas as vocational qualifications but rather an academic one (they were originally labelled by the government as 'vocational Diplomas') but as Smithers and Robinson (2008, p.iv) point out it is important to recognise that vocational and academic learning have different organising principles, which are best served by different types of qualification. The uneasy blend incorporated into the Diplomas with perhaps an attempt to provide a 'one size fits all' intent will eventually be problematical for universities as they attempt to balance the competences of training with the inquiry of education.

Conclusion.

Given the momentum and the implications of the Diplomas outlined above it is imperative we begin to understand the qualification if we are to provide a continuum of learning experience to undergraduates. This will obviously require significant staff development and liaison with schools. First degrees will need to be reappraised and at least to an extent there will need to be a strong element of competence-based assessment contributing towards the degree classification.

Traditionalists and adherents of the A-level entry route will perhaps be dismayed by the implications but HEIs have no choice but to rapidly plan and respond. Those involved within the teaching of education will uneasily reflect upon the teacher training/teacher education debate (Maroto, 2007) and how this has reduced programmes to a succession of skill measurements rather than a holistic appreciation of the complex parameters of teaching. Perhaps this model is now to be repeated across other subjects which will require a reappraisal of what universities stand for. Edge Hill University of Training doesn't have much of a ring to it.

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