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## Education for employment and life: the teaching and learning experience of Diplomas

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### Background

The introduction of the Diplomas for 14-19 year olds is a central part of the government's reform of 14-19 education and represents a major innovation in educational opportunity for young people in England. The Diplomas are delivered by consortia of schools, colleges, training providers, employers and higher education institutions (HEIs). They are offered at three levels (Level 1 - Foundation, Level 2 - Higher and Level 3 - Advanced) across 17 lines of learning which are being implemented in four phases (from September 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011).

- 2008: Construction and the Built Environment, Engineering, Information Technology, Creative and Media, Society, Health and Development.
- 2009: Business, Administration and Finance, Hair and Beauty Studies, Hospitality, Environmental and Land-based Studies, Manufacturing and Product Design.
- 2010: Public Services, Retail Business, Sport and Active Leisure, Travel and Tourism
- 2011: Science, Languages and International Communication, Humanities and Social Sciences

The Diploma combines the development of specialist, sector-related skills and knowledge, and generic skills required for future learning and employment. It comprises three main components.

- Principal learning: sector-related knowledge and underpinning skills needed to progress in relevant sectors.
- Generic learning: functional skills in English, mathematics and ICT, development of personal, learning and thinking skills, and a Project or Extended Project.
- Additional specialist learning: additional subjects that offer the opportunity to study an additional course that is related to the Diploma in more depth or study something different to widen the learner experience such as another language.

Diplomas also include learning in and about the workplace (a minimum of ten days' work experience), and learning through realistic work environments, to facilitate the development of practical skills and work-related application of learning.

### Research Questions

The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) and the University of Exeter to conduct the national evaluation of the implementation and impact of Diplomas between 2008 and 2013. The aims of the evaluation are to:

- review the **implementation and delivery** of the Diplomas - in terms of the processes and factors facilitating or hindering successful implementation; the structural issues related to design and content; and the systems for planning, organising and resourcing provision and supporting progression
- assess the **impact** of the Diplomas on young people - in terms of their response to the opportunity to take these qualifications; their attainment of qualifications; and progression to further and higher education, training and employment.

A range of associated research questions are being explored through the research design, which entails a mixed methodological approach.

## Methods

The research methods include:

- longitudinal tracking surveys of representative samples of Diploma learners in 30 consortia each year commencing with a new sample of year 10 and year 12 learners in 2008, 2009 and 2010
- longitudinal case-studies in a sub-sample of 15 of the sample consortia comprising interviews with the consortium lead, line of learning leads, senior managers in schools and post-16 providers, staff teaching Diplomas, learners pursuing Diplomas, parents and employers and higher education institutions (HEIs) supporting delivery
- analysis of national datasets of attainment
- surveys of employers and Pro-Vice Chancellors and Heads of Admissions in HEIs.

## Frame

The research methods are underpinned by an analytical frame that ensures that the range of evidence relating to each of the research questions is collated to provide an overview for policy makers and practitioners of the progress of the implementation of the Diplomas, and their impact to date, at each stage of the research. For example, our assessment of the success of the Diploma consortia in ensuring that the young people experience a different learning experience through which they apply their learning, including in real-life contexts, and in which the more generic skills are embedded in their wider Diploma learning experience, draws on evidence from surveys of learners, interviews with staff and learners and, ultimately, data on the attainment of young people where different approaches have been adopted to achieve this.

## Research findings

The findings from the evaluation to date are related more to implementation than impact, as the majority of the first cohort of Diploma learners have yet to complete the qualification. The paper would focus on the teaching and learning experience and its role in contributing to preparing young people for education, employment and life with reference to the following key findings.

- **Satisfaction with the Diploma:** The majority of Diploma learners were satisfied with their Diploma course and were enjoying it. They found it to be interesting and different from other learning experiences and particularly welcomed the practical elements and links with the world of work.
- **The teaching experience:** Teachers felt the Diploma involved a different teaching and learning experience from other qualifications. They valued the opportunity for using a holistic model of teaching and the encouragement of independent learning, reported greater use of interactive teaching techniques and less dependence on textbooks and worksheets, and welcomed the link between theory and work-related learning. There was more scope for consortium-wide approaches to monitoring the quality of teaching.
- **Functional skills:** To date functional skills were largely being delivered as a discrete element of the Diploma, often by specialist English, Maths and ICT teachers, and a key area for development for consortia is enhancing further approaches to embedding functional skills in wider Diploma delivery.
- **HEI perspective:** HEIs welcomed the breadth of learning in the Diploma, perceived the Diploma approach to be in line with developments in learning within higher education and valued the independent learning skills that will potentially be developed through the Project.

## **Impact and relevance to the learning and skills sector**

The evidence has assisted policy makers in DCSF, QCDA and UKCES, and those implementing Diplomas in consortia to identify the challenging issues in delivering Diplomas inter-institutionally through consortia, and the factors that are associated with resolving such issues, and the approaches to providing learners with a more applied learning experience that aims to prepare them more effectively for future learning and employment.