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'This Diploma brings learning to life': what students think of the Level 2 Diploma

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Background

In 2005 the government's 14-19 Education and Skills White Paper (DfES 2005) announced a new qualification, a Diploma. 14 of these diploma courses are each based on a particular industry sector. Pilots in five vocational sectors started in September 2008. The 14-19 programme has generated considerable critical comment (see for example the numerous Nuffield 14-19 Review papers). While much of it relates to the organisational implementation of the diplomas there is also an ongoing debate about the pedagogy and curricula of the diplomas (e.g. House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2007; Hodgson et al., 2007)

This research is based on two of the three programmes offered in Birmingham in the first year of the Diploma: Creative & Media and Engineering. The schools offering the programmes formed four collaborative partnerships: Creative & Media in the Central and South consortia and Engineering in the North and South West consortia.

Research Questions

The principal aim of the research is to capture the perceptions of Level 2 diploma students of their experiences of the first year of the Diploma programme. The value of listening to the voices of school students is now widely recognised. The research questions were:

1. What are students' perceptions of the processes of allocation, guidance and choice which have led to their enrolment on diploma courses?
2. What are students' perceptions of the curriculum and pedagogy?
3. What are students' perceptions of the future benefits of the programme in terms of 'employability' and access to higher education?

Methods

The research was based on semi-structured interviews carried out in the spring and summer terms of 2009 with students from 13 schools offering these Level 2 Diplomas in Birmingham. A total of 77 students were interviewed, in groups of 4-8 students. The views of students were treated in confidence. Interviews were transcribed and thematically coded to elicit the key issues identified by the students. Names of schools, colleges and individual students have been anonymised.

Two overlapping categories of literature provide the context for the study. The first is official policy documents, principally those published by the DCSF (O'Donnell et al 2009), Leitch (2006), Ofsted (2005, 2009) and QCA (2008). The second is research-based studies. These include studies of:

- students' perceptions prior to entry into a Diploma course (Bloom 2009; Pugh 2008)
- the relationship between Diplomas and the labour market (Allen and Ainley 2007; Hatcher 2008)
- gender issues relating to Diplomas (O'Donnell et al 2009; Pugh 2008)
- schools' student allocation and student choice issues (Hatcher and Le Gallais 2008; NFER 2008)
- pedagogy and curriculum issues (Ofsted 2005; QCA 2008).

Frame

We situate the research in three principal perspectives. The first is historical. The 14-19 agenda can be seen as the latest inflection of a period of policy which was initiated by Callaghan's Ruskin speech in 1976. The most relevant point of reference is TVEI. The responses of teachers and educationists to TVEI were ambivalent: for some, it could be assimilated into a liberal-humanist discourse of progressive restructuring of the traditional curriculum; for others, it was a Trojan horse for a narrow employer-dominated and socially selective technicist curriculum (Esland et al 1996). This provides a suggestive theoretical framing for research into Diplomas.

The second perspective concerns student choice and institutional allocation procedures, the rationales for them, and the outcomes in terms of the social composition of courses. There is a large and relevant body of research literature which is reflected in our own recent research into 'The work experience placements of secondary school students: widening horizons or reproducing social inequality?' (Hatcher and Le Gallais 2008), on which we draw in this study.

The third perspective focuses on teaching and learning, as experienced by the students. We scrutinise this through the lens provided by the QCA's guidelines for The Diploma and its pedagogy (QCA 2008) which offer a research-based pedagogic model for the Diplomas in terms of experiential, situated and connective learning.

Research findings

Here we can only summarise the main findings.

Students' reasons for choosing the programme fall into three categories: their perceptions of the attractiveness of the learning experience; the equivalence of the Diploma to seven GCSEs; and its relevance to their future education and career plans. Students' responses were mixed with regard to whether the curricular area was one which they intended to pursue as a career, but that did not affect their positive evaluation of the courses.

All the schools operated a selection procedure for entry to the Diploma courses. Students reported three factors: attainment, interest and commitment, and behaviour. Some schools selected high attaining students, some drew from a mixed ability range of students, prioritising student interest and behaviour as criteria.

All the students described the Diploma courses as offering a distinctive learning experience which was substantially common across all the schools and consortia. Its characteristics correspond closely to the QCA guidelines.

- a project-based approach
- practical tasks
- extended blocks of time

- theory and functional skills integrated into practical tasks
- real-life purposes
- off-site activities including workplace visits
- working in FE colleges

- working with professionals

- new technical skills
- the development of social skills
- collaborative group work
- mixed-school groups

- independent but supported learning
- more 'adult' relationships with staff

At this time of writing the future of the Diploma programme is unclear. The principal significance of our research, both for policy-makers and for practitioners, is to provide convincing evidence from the intended beneficiaries of the Diplomas, the students, that the Diplomas are providing them with a distinctive learning experience which they value highly. There are two implications for policy. The first is that, whatever the fate of the Diplomas, the pedagogic model evidenced in our research should be sustained. The second is that it has relevance not just for Diploma-type courses but for the whole of the secondary school curriculum. There is an implication for resourcing: the Diploma pedagogy model depends upon sufficient resourcing.

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