



Submission to House of Commons Education and Skills Committee –
14-19 Specialised Diplomas

Amicus is the UK’s second largest trade union with 1.2 million members across the private and public sectors. Our members work in a range of industries including manufacturing, financial services, print, media, construction and not for profit sectors, local government, education and the NHS.

Introduction

City & Guilds has a long history of providing alternative qualifications for those in schools and colleges whose career choices are neither straightforwardly academic nor vocationally specific. From Foundation Courses through CPVE to the Diploma of Vocational Achievement to GNVQ, City & Guilds staff have developed and managed these “pre-vocational” or “general vocational” awards. Now City & Guilds is working with AQA, the largest unitary awarding body, to develop the full suite of the new 14-19 Diplomas.

What follows is a very high-level summary of some of the main concerns of amicus members working on the development of the Diplomas. This has been put together by Amicus members and representatives who work in the front line across AQA and City and Guilds.

Status

The history of GNVQ – still burned on the minds of some of the members working on the Diplomas – was one of innovative approaches to learning and recognition of achievement – some successful and others not – which were not allowed to mature and develop because they were viewed through the eyes of decision-makers who saw excellence only in traditional academic terms. The “academic–vocational divide” ended up turning GNVQ into a pale and thus unattractive copy of GCSE and A level and consequently guaranteed that they were seen as inferior. This was not inevitable from the first and indeed there was some excellent work done early on which identified that GNVQ developed skills of self-reliance, teamwork and evaluation (which underpin success in higher education and in employment) in a way that academic qualifications did not. The failure to implement the full Tomlinson

vision suggests the new Diplomas will start with disadvantage and second-rate status built in.

We are also getting indications that only the former polytechnic universities will take it seriously in terms of UCAS tariff.

Concept

The Diplomas repeat the design principle of GNVQ in that they are sectorally specific (though not occupationally specific). There are concerns that this may be misguided.

The Diploma Development Partnerships are approaching their work in significantly different ways, undermining the commonality of style and approach learner and teacher expect to see in qualifications badged with a single title. Sector Skills Councils which themselves are new and disparate are struggling with their role here and are approaching it diversely. There are particular concerns that the degree of detail of specification and of depth of knowledge and understanding required differs across the work of the DDPs.

In terms of Employability, the ultimate purpose of the Diplomas, the sectoral split also provides challenges. There is a case to be argued that all the Diplomas should share a much bigger common core – employer's real need is for well-motivated, inquiring learners who have developed skills of learning, working with others, communicating, self-confidence and problem-solving rather than sector-specific knowledge.

Timescales

The five months awarding bodies have to develop the new awards is the shortest development period ever for a major series of qualifications. If it is achieved it is difficult to see how the new awards can combine rigour, consistency, quality and manageability. There is no time to test the work against reality and the expectations and expertise of a wide field of those who might contribute and improve the awards. Schools in particular have a major staff development task for which time is short.

Proposed actions

- Urge on Ministers reconsideration of the rejection of the main thrust of the Tomlinson report – i.e. reform the whole 14-19 curriculum, not just the “vocational” side
- DfES to take a much stronger line on the DDPs to ensure they work in a more collaborative way and to ensure consistency of output, in terms of quantity, level and approach of content
- DfES to reconsider the balance of content of Diplomas, to ensure the balance of sector-specific and general skills, knowledge and understanding meets real learner employment needs for their future, rather than the narrower perspective of particular sectors
- Timescales be reconsidered by Ministers, to ensure this important new initiative is not undermined by rushed and poor quality development processes.

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