

1. INTRODUCTION

Diplomas were first introduced in schools in September 2008. In January 2008, the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) and the University of Exeter were commissioned to evaluate the implementation and impact of Diplomas over the period 2008–2013. In their second survey, *‘Evaluation of the implementation and impact of diplomas: findings from the 2009/10 survey of higher education institutions’*, 19 HEIs were sampled. The survey also reviewed entry requirements for 271 undergraduate courses which appeared to provide potential pathways from the first five Diploma subject areas.

2. KEY FINDINGS

- **Support** for Diplomas among senior staff in higher education was widespread.
- In common with senior managers in the 2008 survey, PVCs in 2009/10 **welcomed the breadth of learning inherent in Diplomas and their potential to widen participation**. Also as in 2008, the range of learning styles fostered by Diplomas was considered well aligned to current developments in teaching and learning on undergraduate (UG) programmes.
- Involvement in Diploma **development** was at a higher level amongst the institutions sampled in this 2009/10 survey than in the 2008 sample. Although none of the institutions in this sample was currently involved with **delivery**, there was a willingness amongst some, mostly teaching-led, HEIs to **collaborate with schools and colleges** in delivery, if additional resources were made available to HEIs for this.
- All institutions in this sample had departments accepting one or more of the first five subject areas for entry onto undergraduate degree courses. Most senior managers were of the view that Diploma **applicants could either stay within the pathway** related to their chosen subject **or branch across to another area of study at UG level**, so long as specific entry requirements (including components of Additional and/or Specialist Learning (ASL)) had been met.
- There was some evidence that undergraduate courses in the broad areas covered by **Creative and Media** and **Society, Health and Development** were most likely to accept Diploma applicants from other subject areas. Courses in the broad areas of IT, Engineering and Construction and the Built Environment were more likely to accept only Diploma applicants studying this line. In practice, almost all applicants for 2010 entry had applied to undergraduate courses closely related to the Diploma they had followed.
- Across the 271 courses for which entry requirements for Diploma applicants on the UCAS website were reviewed, in **only four cases** (in three institutions) was it explicitly stated that the Diploma would **not be an acceptable qualification** for entry. These were: Psychology (2 courses); Adult Nursing (1); and Human Biology (1). However, Diplomas were accepted by other institutions offering these courses.
- Where courses specified the **ASL** component of the Advanced Diploma, this was most commonly an **A level**. Only two HoAs knew of any courses within their institution specifying the nature of the Extended Project.
- As expected, **the number of Diploma applicants to HEIs for 2010 entry was small**, matching the small number of learners starting a Diploma at level 3 in 2008. Approximately **240** applications from Diploma candidates had been received, by February 2010, across the 18 institutions able to provide data (and whose intakes account for approximately one sixth of the volume of undergraduate higher education in England).
- In line with the HEIs’ expectations, Diploma applicants were from their established catchment areas, be these regional, national or both.
- **The quality of applications from Diploma students was reported to be in line with the quality HEIs receive from A level candidates**. All institutions which had already processed applications from Diploma applicants had made some offers.

3. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The report identifies the following key areas with implications for policy:

Encouraging and facilitating greater engagement by HEIs with Diploma delivery

There is a willingness amongst some, mainly teaching-led institutions, to become involved in **delivery**, if additional resources are made available to HEIs for this. However, when asked about involvement in delivery, it was clear that most HEIs had a narrow view of what 'delivery' could involve. Responses, focused almost exclusively on class-based teaching of elements of the Diploma by their staff. It could be helpful to disseminate information to HEIs on the different ways in which they could support Diploma delivery.

Providing information for Diploma-holding applicants and to HEIs

UCAS had received a number of queries from HEIs, schools and colleges in relation to the structure of Diplomas and how the final grade/tariff score is reached. The Diploma is a complex qualification and it was vital that information on how its tariff score was calculated was presented clearly and unambiguously to schools/colleges, students and parents so that young people could understand exactly what they need to achieve to satisfy the entry requirements of HEIs.

Some HEIs specified that the Diploma Additional and/or Specialist Learning component should comprise an A level in a subject related to the applicant's Diploma. This suggests the importance of alerting school/college staff that Specialist Learning is preferred to Additional Learning at level 3 so that young people are guided appropriately and do not find their higher education constrained by their choice of ASL.

Heads of Admissions interviewed in February/March 2010 were keen to know how and when students' Diploma results would be available to HEIs – preferably at the same time as A level results.

Disseminating information relating to admissions practices to organisations with a role in supporting Diplomas.

By November 2009, not all departments in the sampled institutions had specified publicly on the UCAS website their 2010 undergraduate entry requirements in respect of Diploma applicants (relevant to UCAS e-updates to HEIs).

Most HEIs expected Diploma subject areas to create clear-cut progression pathways into higher education. Across the first ten subject areas, this expectation was strongest in the cases of: IT, Creative and Media, Business, Finance & Administration; Society, Health and Development; and Engineering (relevant to marketing by Diploma consortia and partner institutions).

It was expected that such pathways were likely to be established through traditional patterns of application and recruitment, rather than through local 'widening participation' activity or foundation degree provision. This indicated that HEIs were according the Diploma qualification the same status as A levels and expected Diploma applicants to be of a comparable quality to A level candidates (relevant to marketing by Diploma consortia and partner institutions).

Publicising the acceptability of Diplomas across the range of HEIs

Although the number of applications [from Diploma students] to higher education in 2010 was small, it was clear that the quality of the candidates has been comparable to that of A level applicants and that all HEIs (research-intensive and teaching-led institutions) receiving applications had made or were expecting to make offers to Diploma applicants, and the data published by UCAS in November 2010 has confirmed this finding. It will be important to publicise this, to allay worries amongst some schools/colleges, learners and parents that HEIs may not accept the Diplomas as an appropriate qualification for entry onto undergraduate study.

The full report can be viewed/downloaded at: <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications> > Entering DFE-RR093 in the Search field.