Qualifications and Curriculum Authority

Diploma: the future is now

Speech delivered by Teresa Bergin at "14-19 Diplomas: Signposting the Future", 3rd April 2008

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Diploma: the future is now

Good morning.

Today I would like to talk about the future; about how the Diploma is at the very cutting edge of ushering in a new era for education for young people aged 14-19.

I don't need to address the question ‘why the Diploma?’ – the fact that you are here today demonstrates your buy-in. The fact that nearly three-quarters of secondary schools will be engaged with Diploma delivery from 2009 shows that in a very short period of time, schools and colleges have come to see the Diploma as an exciting new kid on the block.

But I do want to reflect on the question of 'what is a Diploma?' Who is this new kid on the block?

I want to revisit the Diploma vision, and revisit how the learning experience and qualification itself comes together to empower young people with skills and knowledge that will prepare them for life in the 21st century.

And I also want to cover how the Diploma is pointing towards a different future, providing a stimulus across the board in terms of teaching and learning.

So what is the Diploma, and how does it address the needs of our young people, our employers, our higher education institutions?

First and foremost, the Diploma is a high-quality curriculum learning experience; one that brings learning to life in new and exciting ways. It's a course for 14-19 year olds that provides a unique and balanced blend of skills and knowledge, viewed through the lens of a particular sector- or subject-based Line of Learning.

The Diploma recognises that the world is changing at an incredible pace, so it puts an emphasis not only on the acquisition of knowledge, but on the ability to apply that knowledge in real-world and different situations. These 'application' skills are universal to all walks of life, from further study within higher education to employment.

By embarking on a Diploma course, young people will develop a range of generic, transferable skills – the teaching of these, critically, is embedded across the Diploma.

So what are these generic, transferable skills? It's what employers and higher education tell us they need from young people…the ability to work in teams to solve problems. The skills of project-based research, development and presentation. The fundamental ability to work

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alongside other professionals, in a professional environment. A mastery of the basics of working with numbers, words and technology. These are the transferable skills that infuse all aspects of Diploma learning.

But the Diploma is about more than acquiring a set of generic skills. By studying a particular Line of Learning, young people have the opportunity to develop an understanding of a particular piece of the world that interests them – IT; public services; business, administration and finance; the humanities; and so on.

Through their Line of Learning, young people explore different dimensions of the sectors and how these interact. They analyse the social, political, economic and environmental dimensions of that sector and the interaction between those dimensions.

In doing so they develop skills, knowledge and understanding that underpin that sector. But in addition to developing a deeper understanding of a particular part of the fabric of modern society, they also begin to develop a rounded understanding of the broader tapestry of society itself, and the impact they have: as individuals, as members of a particular community, as global citizens.

So the Line of Learning becomes a vehicle for wider learning as well as for sector- or subject-related knowledge, skills and understanding – society, health and development students, for example, will build an understanding of a person-centred approach through analysing the justice, health, social care and children's services sectors. Construction and the built environment students will develop a broad understanding of the environment in which architects, construction and civil engineering workers, building services engineers, facilities managers and town planners operate.

Crucially, young people can tailor their Diploma learning in order to add depth in an area of their interest. This can range from specialising in a more specific area of study linked to the Line of Learning – for example, broadcast journalism or music technology within the Diploma in creative and media – or broadening the scope of their Diploma course through the study of a different subject, for example a modern foreign language. By making choices within the Diploma structure, learners add to their skills base or explore an area of knowledge in further detail.

The challenge has been how to reflect this broad learning experience in a structured qualification, while at the same time ensuring that the requisite theoretical and practical knowledge and skills are acquired. The Diploma qualification package reflects and assesses the skills and knowledge balance that I have described. This package is unique to Diploma teaching and learning.

As a composite qualification, with three required components – principal learning, generic learning and additional and specialist learning – achieving a Diploma signifies that learners have developed a wide range of transferable skills as well as skills and knowledge in a particular Line of Learning. Only if learners can demonstrate such a breadth of study are they entitled to the full Diploma qualification.

Principal learning qualifications assess a learner's depth of understanding of their Line of Learning and how this interrelates with the wider world. Because 50% of that learning must be applied, this component also recognises the learner's ability to exercise their theoretical knowledge in a real situation, for example the workplace. So whilst an IT Diploma student would understand the theory behind a website design and be able to design a website, for example, he or she would also have an understanding of the internet’s changing role in global society, and know how to use that combination of knowledge in real-world applications.

Generic learning is built from a number of constituent qualifications and other required elements that assess the learner's generic, or transferable, skills. By undertaking work experience of at least 10 days, learners develop and demonstrate skills around how to conduct themselves in a professional environment, and apply their learning to this situation.

Through an assessment of functional skills in English, mathematics and ICT, the learner's 'mastery of the basics' in these areas is tested and recognised at the appropriate level. Via the recognition of personal, learning and thinking skills, learners are shown to have the ability to think creatively, to work independently or in a team, and to solve problems effectively.

And through completing a project, learners must prove their skills in research, design, realisation and presentation of a performance, a report or an artefact.

The additional and specialist learning component reflects a learner's breadth or depth of study. By following defined progression routes, learners can leverage this component to demonstrate their interest in a particular aspect of their Line of Learning, with a view to further study or a specific career. Or learners can broaden their studies, for example by choosing to study a modern foreign language, or humanities subject, as part of their Diploma course.

Looking further to the future, through the Extended Diploma – available from 2011 – the Diploma will also recognise the wider statutory curriculum and provide the opportunity for extra stretch and challenge that some young people need.

But all of this – the vision for the Diploma, the breadth and depth of the Diploma, and the mix of skills and knowledge – will only be any good if the slogan that we use to characterise the Diploma – bringing learning to life – is valid across two dimensions: that the Diploma is not

just about making learning more lively, but that it's making what an individual learns as a teenager relevant to their life as a working adult. The Diploma must represent a solid pathway to the future.

Working together, we need to ensure that employers and universities recognise and value the Diploma, and that they understand that it meets their needs as well as those of the learner. We need the wider employer and university community – those that have not yet been directly involved with the Diploma – to understand that our Diploma students bring not just a specific experience of a particular Line of Learning, but also those critical generic, transferable skills and a depth of further study – the additional and specialist learning – that make the Diploma such a unique proposition.

So in the Diploma I believe we – all of use here today – are creating a high-quality learning experience that will enthuse and inspire learners. Together we are creating rigorous qualifications that test learners across a broad spectrum of skills and knowledge, and that employers and higher education will have confidence in.

But perhaps most exciting of all (and I recognise this is also a challenge) we are creating new ways of working – from development through to delivery – that herald a new future for 14-19 learning itself.

In designing the Diploma, a new precedent for collaboration between industry, higher education and the wider education community has been set. By matching up the skills needs of particular sectors, the current and future skills need of the global economy as a whole, and a wider agenda to provide challenging and holistic education to all young people, the Diploma is forging a new path in the design of qualifications for the 21st century.

The delivery of the Diploma demands innovation. Its unique combination of skills, knowledge and application challenges the system to create new partnerships between industry, schools, the FE sector, and higher education in order to deliver the curriculum effectively. Developing a consortium approach to teaching and learning at a local level will enable education to deliver at every level, from the individual learner, to local employers, to the wider economy.

The Diploma will retain the best of existing high-quality education through the additional and specialist learning component, which allows learners to combine Diploma-specific learning with study towards qualifications of their choice. But even in this area, we will need to be prepared to move outside our comfort zone. The demand for new specialist learning qualifications, building on existing provision, has already begun to emerge.

Today is all about signposting the future for Diplomas. There's a lot for us to learn and to share today, from hearing about teaching and learning for those Diplomas starting in 2008 and 2009, to insights from partners involved in both development and delivery, to the launch of the Diploma development partnerships for the phase 4 Diplomas.

Let me finish then by saying that from where I'm standing, and with the Diploma about to become a reality across England, the future looks very exciting.

Ken Boston, QCA's chief executive, said three weeks ago in his address to members of the Association of School and College Leaders that the Diploma had the very real potential to be the qualification of choice for all 14-19 year olds by 2013.

He is right.

The Diploma represents a truly exciting opportunity to build on the best of what we know in qualification design, and teaching and learning.

Whether you have been involved in the Diploma's development to date, or are becoming involved today; whether you are from a school, a university, an employer, a representative body or a member of a Diploma development partnership; you are central to creating the future – central to designing the future of learning – in turning the Diploma vision into a Diploma reality and truly bringing learning to life.