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Putting the Humanities to Work

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Abstract

This paper provides an account of the general political strategy behind the new 14-19 Diplomas in England. It considers the rationale and the design process associated with one particular Diploma – the Diploma for Humanities and Social Sciences – a qualification that is intended to combine vocational and academic content and purposes. The article reviews the research and consultation activity that supported the design and examines what it contributed and how this bears upon the future success of the Diploma. By way of conclusion, it is argued that the increased role for research and consultation in Diploma design suggests the way forward for more democratic models of qualification making which, if done well, could lead to more valid qualifications.

Background and context

The introduction of a suite of 14 new 'applied' qualifications in England in 2008 has to be understood in relation to a long history of attempts to improve the status, validity and take up of vocational qualifications in England (Ainley 1999; Hodgson and Spours 2010) and elsewhere (Clarke and Winch 2006). The Diploma story is also part of the international drive to explore ways in which education can serve to improve 'employability' (Grubb 2008) and an international trend to develop qualifications that can be recognised as both academic and vocational (Deissinger and Ott 2009). In addition, by focusing on the process of reform and the manner in which stakeholders and researchers have been engaged, this article explores issues which are relevant to debates about legitimacy and democracy in relation to educational reform (Raffe and Spours 2007).

This article draws upon work carried out by a team, led by the author, that was commissioned to carry out research to support the development of one Diploma, the Diploma in Humanities and Social Sciences (Humanities Diploma Development Partnership 2009c; d). The research was intended to support enhanced participation by stakeholders in the process of qualification design and approval, however, the scope and purpose of the research was constrained by the political reform process in which it was situated. This article represents an attempt to gain a critical perspective on this 'instrumental research' by placing it in the context of broader academic research.

In 2003, a government Green Paper set out the case for reform of 14-19 education in England and a working group of experts was set up under the chairmanship of Sir Mike Tomlinson. Tomlinson reported in 2004, recommending the scrapping of the existing General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSEs) and Advanced General Certificates of Education (A Levels) and their replacement with a unified diploma for 19 year olds which would include academic, vocational and 'general' elements or units (Tomlinson 2004). However, in February 2005, the Labour Government announced in its White Paper on 14-19 Education a more limited reform plan: A Levels and GCSEs were to be preserved but a new 'Specialised' or vocational Diploma would be offered to all learners as well (Department for Education and Skills 2005). This new Diploma was intended to: rationalise and raise the status of vocational qualifications, increase the staying-on rate and attainment post-16, address the skills needs of employers and engage learners by offering them new choices and new ways of learning.

The ensuing reform process has been influenced by the thinking of the Tomlinson Review *and* the White Paper strategy. This dual legacy has led to three important innovations with regard to qualification development: (1) the plan to offer a relatively large 'baccalaureate' type qualification which could include a better balance of skills, knowledge and understanding than current qualifications (2) a strategy of developing the Diploma alongside existing qualifications - both academic and vocational - without defining from the start just what the relationship between old and new would be and (3) the strategy

of increasing employer involvement in the process of qualification design in order to increase the validity and credibility of qualifications.

Each of these strategies can be understood as a way of overcoming perceived constraints or limitations of the previous reforms. The 'baccalaureate' approach was intended to guard against the narrowness of vocational qualifications. In the past, some new-made vocational qualifications have attracted relatively few students and this was associated with their offering or appearing to offer only limited progression (Fisher 2003). The breadth of the Diploma content is intended to address this deficit.

The strategy of developing Diplomas as an alternative (rather than a replacement) to A Levels, GCSEs, existing vocational qualifications such as the Business and Technical Council National Diplomas (BTECs) and even Apprenticeships may have resulted from a desire to avoid - or at least postpone - the hostility and uncertainty that comes from threatening an established qualification. The White Paper implied that the new Diplomas would benefit from the inclusion of existing qualifications - academic and vocational - as units within a larger qualification; the Tomlinson Report, on the other hand, expressed doubts about whether this would be workable. In practice, resolving this issue has proceeded alongside Diploma development. This has been seen by some as a failure to grasp the nettle (West 2008), (however, it can also be understood as a means of reducing resistance and searching for compromises.

The strategy of engaging employers in the qualification development process through the agency of new-formed employer representative organisations, the Sector Skills Councils, can be understood as an ambitious attempt to forestall the credibility deficiency that was judged by some to have damaged previous reforms, for example, the National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) – some of which have enjoyed little recognition or take up by employers (Wolf 1997).

Some critics have accused policy makers of a lack of ‘policy memory’ in attempting to bring about reform using strategies and ideas which have already been tried and are known to have failed (Stanton 2008). While it is undoubtedly true that the Diplomas belong to a tradition of vocational reform and that they share features with earlier innovations such as BTECs, General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) and Advanced Vocational Certificates of Education (AVCEs), the three strategies described above can be, more charitably, understood as ‘product improvements’ whose purpose is to overcome obstacles that have been encountered in the past. This article is an attempt to explore just what difference these strategies have made in the case of one Diploma in particular, the Diploma for Humanities and Social Sciences.

Diploma Development

This is not the place for a detailed account of the form of the design process or of the way that it has developed over time (Ertl *et al.* 2009). The design process included:

- Identifying, formulating and defining the boundaries to learning outcomes (determining content)
- Defining volumes for whole qualifications and for composite units and making decisions about the grouping of content, in particular, for assessment purposes
- Consulting with and gaining approval from key stakeholders
- Formulating and agreeing rules and processes for assessment and grading
- Ensuring consistency, compatibility and where appropriate differentiation in relation to other qualifications in terms of assessment, processes and outcomes, standards, terminology
- Marketing and communicating the new qualifications
- Leading, co-ordinating and where necessary, troubleshooting, development.

These tasks have been shared between a variety of agencies. The Diploma Development Partnerships (DDPs) were created solely to carry out some of these tasks. DDPs are not free-standing but are 'owned' by Sector Skill Councils (SSCs). The strategy of locating DDPs within SSCs provides the mechanism by which the Diplomas are to be shaped and endorsed by the employers who, ultimately will be 'end users' of the qualification and employers of Diploma holders. SSCs are intended to serve and engage employers but they are publicly funded and they are tasked by and accountable to the government. In consequence they function as a broker between public policy and sectoral interests. Like the SSCs, the DDPs have

taken on a mediation role: their task is not so much to pursue what the sector says that it wants, but rather to give the sector an effective voice in a programme which has been designed at a national, political level.

The challenge of this brokerage task depends on a 'matching' of what the employment sector wants and what a particular policy, in this case a new qualification, can offer. In the case of the Diploma for Humanities and Social Sciences the matching process has been challenged by the lack of a close correspondence between the content of the humanities and the social sciences and the skills associated with employment in the creative and cultural industries. It is not that these subjects are not relevant to these industries, rather these subjects have not historically been regarded as 'vocational' and so they have not been regarded as part of a preparation for any identified employment and, in particular, not for employment in one employment sector rather than any other.

From Specialist Diplomas to Diplomas for All

Initially it was planned that there would be 14 Diploma lines, each corresponding to a broad area of employment, such as 'engineering', 'health social and development' and 'creative and media.' It was only in October 2007, that the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) announced its intention to create a further three Diploma lines which would be defined in relation to subjects or subject groupings rather than employment sectors (DCSF 2007). The rationale for this move included a reference back

to the broad aims of the Tomlinson Review: ‘to tackle the historic barriers between vocational and academic learning’ and a restatement of the thinking of Tomlinson that this could be done by the introduction of 14-19 qualifications *for all* - which included key skills, broader generic skills and practical and experiential skills as well as theoretical knowledge.

“Alongside subject and sector knowledge and a curriculum that continues to adapt to keep pace with developing knowledge, employers and universities want more. For the world of tomorrow, each and every young person will need a broader range of practical and experiential skills and attitudes combined in an integrated and fully-rounded learning experience, in order to adapt and learn throughout their lives.” (DCSF 2007, pp., p.4)

The critical claim is that the Diploma curriculum would be appropriate for every learner - including those who wanted to continue with a general rather than a vocationally related route. The DCSF maintained the strategy of deferring a decision about the ultimate relationship between A Levels/GCSEs and Diplomas. A Levels and GCSEs were themselves to be reformed in a manner that would enable them to do at least some of the things that Diplomas promised. The Government would not pre-judge how well all of these developing qualifications would in fact meet the needs of learners, employers and HE. A general review was promised for 2013

Subject Communities and Subject Development

Ivor Goodson and like-minded scholars have published studies which document how secondary school subjects and their corresponding qualifications used to develop - at least up to the introduction of the National Curriculum (Goodson 1993). The general model is that enthusiasts build subject and teacher associations that in turn develop common curriculum content and resources. Involvement from universities is cultivated to support progression, give legitimacy and produce teachers. Qualifications are developed in partnership with awarding bodies which codify the curriculum and secure recognition and credential value. Local practice, at school and classroom level, is subject to local factors and may differ from approved national norms.

The advent, firstly, of GCSEs and then the National Curriculum mark a much more extensive intervention of central government in the life of school subjects in England. GCSE development established the process whereby a central government curriculum agency defines the scope and content of subjects through a template known as the 'Subject Criteria' which then forms the benchmark against which qualifications are accredited (that is approved for use). The National Curriculum provided a detailed prescription for subject content for 5 - 16 year olds.

Nevertheless, well established subject communities continue to exert an important influence on the way that subjects are taught, examined and developed. They do this through the activities of subject and professional

associations and through cross-cutting relationships between official advisors and inspectors, senior subject assessors and examiners working with awarding bodies, consultants involved in development work and subject experts in higher education and teacher education or educational research.

In the context of Diploma development, the striking point is that the government's strategy to reform qualifications by creating a dedicated agency (rather than tasking the central national curriculum body or delegating to awarding bodies) and requiring it to consult with key stakeholders has had the effect of enhancing the contribution that the subject communities have been able to make. The latest three Diplomas, Languages, Science and Humanities and Social Sciences are well served by a considerable number of energetic and engaged subject communities with ideas, interests and aspirations to advance and these communities have contributed directly through DDPs and helped to mobilise participation in wider consultations. Paradoxically, although the Diploma reform process has been instigated from the centre, it has unleashed processes of competition and coalition building on the part of subject communities which are redolent of pre-National Curriculum years.

The Diploma Development Process

During the first phases of Diploma development there was a very strong emphasis on the role of the DDP in gathering and concerting employer voices to determine the content (known as 'learning outcomes') in the new Diplomas.

Engaging employers in creating qualifications was, as stated above, a key strategic innovation and not unnaturally this strategy was given priority in the development process. DDPs were also tasked with researching higher education views, since the Diploma was intended to support progression into higher education as well as employment. However, the positioning and staffing of DDPs meant that this was given less emphasis and that less time and less expertise was deployed in consulting with higher education (Ertl *et al.* 2009). Consultation with teachers, teacher and subject associations received even less priority in the early development work, though as time went on government guidance to DDPs increasingly required that the perspective of providers should be considered and DDPs became more skilled at consulting with higher education (Ertl *et al.* 2009).

However, the fourth phase of Diploma development encountered much larger and more powerful constituencies than anything faced by the earlier phases. Languages, sciences and humanities and social sciences make up a large share of 14-19 educational activity. Diplomas in these subjects will inevitably be compared to GCEs and GCSEs which are well established, national qualifications with high credibility and a benchmark status. It was perhaps for this reason that a more carefully structured, more professionalized and more inclusive development process was demanded by the government. This new process had the following features:

- it was framed by preparatory work from a research department of an independent awarding body (Cambridge Assessment April 2008)

- it conceptualised the process in terms of a well established model for curriculum development
- roles, committee structures and work plans and mile-stones were prescribed in considerable detail and specified in contractual arrangements
- a professional research and consultation body was commissioned to assist each DDP.

The first stage of the design process was formally identified as an exercise in needs analysis. It was not assumed that the needs of employers should always prevail or that employers could be expected to have a consistent and clear set of skills needs. Indeed the work programmes made it explicit that the needs of all stakeholders should be separately identified and that differences or inconsistencies should be reported in the research. Apart from employers, other stakeholders included teachers, learners, awarding bodies, subject associations, higher education, professional bodies and other representative bodies such as teacher and school and college associations as well as religious and cultural organisations (QCA *et al.* 2008).

In the words of the Toolkit provided for the DDPs by QCA:

'It is important to identify all stakeholders and to attribute the appropriate weight of importance to their requirements and views. In previous curriculum and qualification development processes when this balance has not been achieved the qualifications have been difficult to teach, assess and/or deliver.'

Additionally, if this is not achieved the curriculum and qualification might not fulfil its purpose'. (QCA et al. 2008 p. 88)

This raises a critical point, to which we shall return in the conclusion: just how are we to distinguish between success in terms of building a workable consensus between stakeholders and success in terms of fulfilling the purpose for the Diplomas. While on the face of it there may seem to be clear difference between achieving prior objectives and negotiating some kind of compromise, this difference seems less clear when it is recalled that what was known about needs when the objectives were defined was necessarily broad and hypothetical so that, it could reasonably be said that, the objective of the qualification design process was to meet the needs of all of stakeholders as well as possible.

The second stage included research of existing provision, relevant practice and past innovations, issues relating to pedagogy, workforce, assessment and market need.

This led to development of a statement of purpose for each Diploma and proposals for content and a succession of targeted and broader consultation activities intended to explore the needs of different stakeholders and discover how they judged provisional proposals. From this consultation arose the main DDP outcomes: the Line of learning Statement (which described the purpose and content) and the Line of Learning Criteria (which expressed the content in

the form of a set of rules for awarding bodies seeking to gain accreditation for qualifications).

What Did the Stakeholders and Consultations Contribute?

As we have seen, the Humanities Diploma Development Partnership was charged with the task of developing purpose and content and consulting widely. The question for this article is: how well did this process permit different stakeholders to contribute?

The published Line of Learning Statement summarises the consultation processes and the distinctive needs associated with different stakeholders (Humanities Diploma Development Partnership 2009c). The Line of Learning Statement also describes how consultation took place. Broadly this operated at three levels of engagement. Firstly, the DDP invited representatives from relevant stakeholder organisations to join 'working groups' that met regularly throughout the first year of the DDP's operation. There were four working groups representing: Higher Education (HE), employers, teachers and subject associations. In addition to the working groups, the DDP operated regular meetings of a large Steering Group and a small Quality Group - both of which included stakeholder representatives. In addition, the DDP consulted with a wider audience of interested stakeholders through two cycles of regional meetings and on-line questionnaires. Lastly, the DDP carried out focused

consultations/research with particular groups, for example, awarding bodies, 14-19 learners, undergraduates and admissions tutors.

It is clear from the Line of Learning Statement and from the consultation reports that informed the writing of the Statement (Humanities Diploma Development Partnership 2009b; c; d), that stakeholders were able to identify issues, connect them to proposals for the Diploma and communicate the intensity or importance of the issues. It is not possible here to consider the substance of these issues but the following table does exemplify issues that were raised by stakeholders and which were recognised in the further deliberations in relation to the design of the Diploma:

Examples of Issues	Stakeholder
Distinctive concepts, processes or approach of particular discipline	Subject Associations
Promotion, renewal or defence of subject in curriculum	Subject Associations
Will targeted learners engage with particular material?	Teachers
Can particular content be delivered?	Teachers
Discussion about value, rigour and phasing of interdisciplinary study	Higher education
Will the Diploma help to widen access to HE?	Higher education
Will the Diploma remedy defects in A	Higher education

Levels and GCSEs?	
Valuation of generic thinking skills and employability skills rather than humanities disciplines	Employers
Concerns about the credibility of new qualifications	Learners
Concerns about over-prescription, for example, of unit content, within qualification	Awarding Bodies

That such concerns and issues were recognised and contributed to decision making is documented - which is not to assume that they were dealt with satisfactorily or optimally – however, it is part of the argument of this paper that a documented, collaborative, timely and fair-minded consideration of such issues is a necessary pre-condition of a democratic and responsive model of qualification design.

There are questions to be asked about just how well the consultative processes operated by the Humanities DDP worked. It is useful to distinguish between the articulation, evaluation and use of contributions - which together make for democratic and collaborative qualification design. Joining a ‘working group’ depended on being invited and being willing to give up time to attend (without payment) - which tended to limit involvement to those who were broadly in favour of the Diploma in Humanities. This ‘voluntaristic’ model meant that some types of stakeholder were energetically

represented right the way through the design process, whilst others were more intermittently and more passively represented. The different approaches of stakeholders impacted upon their involvement: some seeing the Diploma in Humanities as an important opportunity to achieve goals that were dear to them, whilst others, perhaps sceptical that their voices would be listened to, not always bothering to communicate objections which they believed had already been discounted.

Getting employers to participate proved particularly challenging for the Humanities DDP. Measured in crude numerical terms, the Science Diploma consultation attracted considerably more employer responses than the corresponding Humanities and Social Sciences consultation. Those employers who did contribute to the Humanities DDP were highly engaged and expressed strong views on both philosophy and content. Employer representative organisations were able to communicate the findings of past research and consultations. However, there is currently a cultural gap between an education characterised in terms of humanities and social sciences subjects and the concerns that employers express about skills, workforce capability and recruitment. Indeed it was part of the mission of the Humanities DDP to address this cultural gap and to explore how the humanities and social sciences could be made more relevant to employers. The gap was addressed by qualitative research designed to find a language for employers to contribute – but the scale of this research was constrained by the time line (Humanities Diploma Development Partnership 2009a).

Decision making in Diploma Design

A collaborative design process is intended not only to permit stakeholders to share their views and concerns but also to give some weight or force to these contributions in decision making. In the Line of Learning Statement, and elsewhere, the exercise is described as 'a partnership approach' (Humanities Diploma Development Partnership 2009c). In practice, it is possible to distinguish a variety of micro-political or organisational interactions whose play seems to affect decision making in Diploma design:

- Bureaucratic - some decisions are formally tied to certain roles, e.g. chair of a particular group. It follows that individuals who occupy these roles expect to take these decisions, though they will take account of others when they do so
- Leadership - this is distinct from bureaucratic authority (though it may be combined with it). It refers to the capacity of individuals to inspire, bully, persuade etc. and influence the behaviour and beliefs of others
- Contractual - DDPs are contracted through their parent SSCs to carry out defined tasks and to deliver certain outcomes at certain dates
- Brinkmanship - more powerful and 'savvy' stakeholders are aware that their endorsement is important to the success of the Diploma project.

Their capacity to withdraw support publicly - and thereby damage the credibility of the qualification - adds force to their arguments

- Rules and guidance - the DDP was provided with guidelines jointly issued by its contractual manager, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) and the Qualification and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and those guidelines were backed up by continuous advice, feedback and updates from these agencies by expert officers
- Debate, advocacy and voting - many hours of meeting time were spent considering alternative understandings and approaches, seeking to gain broad agreement and occasionally voting in order to obtain a majority decision.

These processes did, in fact, achieve a number of compromises and agreements which, in different ways, reconciled alternative approaches or balanced the claims of competing needs. For example, the general Diploma understanding of 'applied learning' was that Diplomas require students to be able to apply their learning in work tasks or to problems drawn from work. In other words, the domain of application was defined as a work situation. This interpretation was resisted at most levels within the Humanities DDP and instead the alternative view was developed that work situations are a key domain for the application of the knowledge, skills and understanding pertaining to the Humanities Diploma - but not the only domain. Learners could also expect to apply their capabilities in personal, social, community and

political domains (Humanities Diploma Development Partnership 2009c). This understanding, which made it possible to hold together the wide variety of stakeholder interests in the partnership, went on to influence the way that content was defined and the balance between strictly vocational and other contexts for learning.

Research

As already mentioned, research was given a relatively high profile within the development process. The research brief extended beyond consultation. It included the investigation of educational programmes and qualifications that might provide lessons for this Diploma, for example interdisciplinary programmes in secondary and higher education, in England and elsewhere. Secondary research also explored recent evaluations and innovations in humanities and social sciences education, trends in the take-up of qualifications, progression between educational phases and into employment, equal opportunities issues (Humanities Diploma Development Partnership 2009e). Additional in-depth qualitative work investigated the views of admissions tutors, undergraduates, employers and 14-19 year old students (Humanities Diploma Development Partnership 2009a; d).

This research was most effective when it could be used to extend understanding of issues or concerns which arose in stakeholder discussions. In other words, research findings could sometimes suggest solutions to disagreements. For example, the issue of inter-disciplinarity constituted an on-

going source of disagreement which made it difficult to agree how units of the Diploma would be organised. Many, particularly teachers, held that an inter-disciplinary approach would distinguish the Diploma from traditional academic qualifications; many employers thought that inter-disciplinarity would encourage application and the development of employability skills and some HE representatives identified inter-disciplinary research as a growth area. On the other hand, a number of subject representatives and more traditional HE representatives were sceptical about inter-disciplinarity at this level, and some teachers had concerns about how it might be delivered.

Research into the actual practice of inter-disciplinary programmes and research showed that many such programmes were experimental and had not been sustained, that inter-disciplinary programmes needed to be sustained by methodologies drawn from separate disciplines and that inter-disciplinarity was most likely to be successful when offered alongside single-discipline programmes or programmes that connected rather than fully integrated disciplines. The research supported the emergence of a shared view that inter-disciplinarity should be available as an opportunity rather than a requirement (Humanities Diploma Development Partnership 2009e). This was a view which then helped to shape the actual organisation of content and to provide a balance between disciplinary rigour and inter-disciplinary exploration.

However, the successful deployment of research depends upon its co-ordination with the decision making process. Where it was difficult to carry

out research in time to inform decisions, as it was for example in relation to learners, it was more difficult for decision taking to benefit from research. Furthermore, the research process revealed some gaps in knowledge which were impossible to address in the time available. For example, literature reviews revealed that some school subjects, such as history and geography, are relatively very well served by existing research while other subjects such as economics and sociology are poorly served (Humanities Diploma Development Partnership 2009e).

Despite these limitations, the above examples suggest that research can provide a way of validating claims about needs and weighting issues which stakeholders raise in the course of a qualification design process. What, however, is also clear is that action linked research of this kind is likely to be dependent on a larger body of existing research and established methodology. If there are gaps in that research or if there are limited methodologies available to support research then it may be difficult for researchers to deliver what is needed – when it is needed. For example, methodologies for engaging young people in a complex, collaborative processes of curriculum design remain relatively undeveloped.

The value of making the findings from research more reliable and durable can hardly be doubted - even by the most pragmatic decision maker. As mentioned above, there is an ongoing tension in the Diploma development process between being guided by the purpose or vision of the Diplomas and being guided by what, in practice, stakeholders can agree on. This is the

nexus where research has the capacity to make a decisive contribution since the findings of research do offer a means for validating and weighting the claims of stakeholders. However, the findings of research can only hope to have any hold over what stakeholders say, and do, if different researchers address the differences in methodology and findings that might otherwise reinforce differences between stakeholders.

Outcomes

By July 2009 the Humanities DDP had managed to publish its Line of Learning Statement and this has formed the basis for agreement and publication of the Line of Learning Criteria. The next phase involves the awarding bodies developing qualifications, in line with the Criteria, which are expected to gain accreditation by July 2010 ready for delivery from September 2011. The Humanities and Social Sciences Diploma will offer a synthesis between a curriculum conceived in terms of academic subjects and a curriculum conceived in terms of meeting the skills needs of employers and young people as workers - in attempting this particular synthesis it is perhaps the most ambitious and innovative of all of the 17 Diplomas.

Innovations of the Diploma Development Process

This paper has described some of the innovations in process and organisation which have been put in place in order to design the Diploma in Humanities and Social Sciences. The Diploma development process was conceived with

the primary goal of engaging employers in order to ensure that Diplomas were informed by employers' needs and were seen to be so informed. With the Humanities and Social Sciences Diploma, this strategy of qualification reform through empowerment of stakeholders has been extended. Subject communities, higher education, teachers and learners have been recruited to a collective process of designing and endorsing a new qualification.

It is too early to tell whether the qualification will, in fact, succeed when other attempts to find a middle way between academic and vocational qualifications have failed. Success will depend upon:

- whether the new qualification is valid - that is whether it accurately measures capabilities which are actually of value to young people in progressing into work, training and further or higher education
- whether the new qualification is credible - that is whether gatekeepers believe that it is valid and whether they accord it as much or more recognition than alternative qualifications
- whether the qualification can be delivered and assessed successfully.

Validity, credibility and deliverability are not absolutes. Future evaluators will be asking whether the Humanities and Social Sciences Diploma offers an overall improvement in terms of these three criteria and whether that improvement is sufficient to warrant the cost and upheaval involved.¹

However, the question here is whether the innovations in process are likely to have contributed to each of these three objectives.

It seems likely that validity has been improved in relation to A Levels and GCSEs since the involvement of HE and employers and the concern to engage learners has meant that traditional subject content has been filtered to make it more likely that learning outcomes are applicable in work and higher education and relevant to the target audience of learners. This is difficult to prove and the argument depends a great deal on how this target audience is defined.

The credibility of the Humanities and Social Sciences Diploma appears to have been enhanced by the extensive engagement of stakeholders, particularly universities. However, there are uncertainties and risks involved in this process and the Advanced Science Diploma has been postponed for a year because it was not possible to get agreement between key stakeholders within the original time line and proceeding without agreement would have seriously damaged credibility.

Whether the development process will support success in teaching and learning and assessment raise the greatest questions. There are concerns that committees, guidelines and consultations will depart from what is known to be workable and will make demands for new practices which are burdensome, costly or which fail to take account of the realities of teaching and learning on the ground. That said, there had been far greater involvement of teachers and head teachers in the design process than there were for the earlier 14 Diplomas. The strategies for the timing, support and

professional development relating to implementation have been examined elsewhere (Oates 2008; Stanton 2008). However, at this point we simply do not know whether the Diplomas will be delivered successfully though there is some, fairly positive, emerging evidence from the latest Ofsted inspection (Ofsted 2009) and the national evaluation (Lynch *et al.* 2010).

Issues

It has been argued in this paper that the development process for the Humanities and Social Sciences Diploma represents a significant innovation in the process of design and that there is evidence that process innovation has led to some improvements in vocational qualifications. That said these innovations also raise a number of questions:

- 1) There is evidence that this consultation is of value in terms of improving validity and credibility. However, it is less clear what the standards should be for the extent, quality and duration of such consultations and how such standards should be arrived at. It would be valuable to develop a more explicit understanding of 'sufficiency' in consultation.
- 2) It has been shown that the development process combined a delegation of powers to a specialist agency combined with highly refined organisational and managerial measures to secure accountability to political masters and good communication flows. However, if central control is too strong, then much of the advantage of

delegating powers will be forfeited, indeed, there is a danger of key players being alienated if they feel that their expectations are disappointed. It may be that a somewhat more 'hands off' approach to development is possible, provided this is backed up by strong, independent decision making when it comes to qualification accreditation.²

- 3) How should expertise be recruited and deployed within more democratic processes of qualification design? In the development of the Humanities and Social Sciences Diploma, expertise, in the form of permanent staff, was located in the regulator (QCA) and in awarding bodies. Further experts were recruited, as consultants and researchers, to work for the DDP, QCA, UKCES and the awarding bodies. On the face of it, contracting appropriate consultants as and when needed, is an efficient and goal-orientated way of accessing expertise. However, there are questions about whether the market will actually be able to supply the right expertise at the right time and whether the contracting of experts by many agencies may lead to polarisation and misunderstanding. However, more might be done to ensure that expertise communicates and accumulates across collaborating partners and successive stages.
- 4) Lastly, the Diploma experience raises questions about the relationship between processes to develop new national qualifications and political change at a national level. In June 2010 the new Secretary of State for Education announced that the Government was withdrawing support from the three phase four Diplomas, including the Diploma for

Humanities and Social Sciences. It is not clear, at this point in time whether any awarding organisations will wish to continue with this qualification independently. This decision suggests that while increased engagement and consultation in the Diploma development process may have increased their legitimacy, this legitimacy is not immune to challenge through national democratic processes.

Notes

- 1 A national evaluation of the Diploma is already underway (Lynch *et al.* 2010; O'Donnell *et al.* 2009)
- 2 The QCA has now been divided into two institutions: the Qualification and Curriculum Development Authority and Ofqual (the regulatory authority) which reports to Parliament rather than to the government. This increased independence might facilitate the development proposed.

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