THE ENGLISH 14-19 EDUCATION AND TRAINING SYSTEM: TWO REFORM APPROACHES TO A SINGLE PHASE

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INTRODUCTION

In the period since the Government's Green Paper on 14-19 education and training (DfES 2002), the development of a distinctive 14-19 phase in England has been a policy priority for the New Labour Government. It is also a site of enormous controversy following its rejection in late 2004 of the Tomlinson Final Report's proposal for the long-term development of a unified diploma system to encompass all 14-19 learning (Working Group for 14-19 Reform 2004).

This paper reviews the current state of play of the 14-19 reforms by describing Government policy in relation to curriculum and qualifications and institutional organisation, governance and the policy process.¹ The Government’s approach to reform is then compared with perspectives from a range of social partners, drawing on recent policy documentation from teacher unions and education professional associations, academic literature and interviews with 23 key policy actors undertaken during autumn 2007².

Using this evidence, together with ideas developed in two major research projects – the Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training in England and Wales and an ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme Project ‘The impact of policy on learning and inclusion in the Learning and Skills Sector’ - this paper attempts to address three questions:

1. How might we characterise the Government’s evolving 14-19 strategy in England?
2. What other perspectives are there from the wider policy, practitioner and research communities?
3. What are the implications of these two perspectives for the future development of policy and practice in the 14-19 phase?

While we use an historical perspective, our main motivation for writing this paper is to provide an understandable picture of a very complex policy area at a time when the implementation process is marginalising reflection and narrowing the terms of debate. In the concluding section of the paper, we suggest that there are indeed two distinct reform approaches to 14-19 education and training; one from the Government that tolerates and even accentuates division, and the other from a range of practitioner, researcher and civil society organisations that advocates great inclusion and unification. Contrary to accusations from Ministers that the second approach is ‘living in an ivory tower and fighting old battles’ (Asthana 2008), with its support of the Tomlinson Report, we suggest that the two approaches currently compete and overlap at local and even national levels of policy to command a vision for the future while improving opportunities for learners now.

¹ By the term ‘governance’ we are referring to the way in which government operates through a range of national, regional and local agencies in an era of what has been termed ‘policy steering’ (Kooiman 2003).
² Between September and December 2007, with the help of Richard Steer, we interviewed a total of 23 policy actors involved in the 14-19 reform process. They included politicians, policy advisers, senior civil servants, academics, officials from national government agencies, awarding bodies and representatives of local authorities, teacher unions and professional associations and employers. We have used the codes (PA 1-23) for interviewees and have not indicated the organisation to which they belong in order to fully protect their identity.
THE GOVERNMENT’S APPROACH

It is important to see the Government’s approach to 14-19 reform within its historical context in order to understand how it emerged and how it is evolving. 14-19 reform has been both a drawn out process and one of considerable turbulence (Lumby and Foskett 2005). In this paper, we will focus primarily on the two dominant strands of policy – curriculum and qualifications and organisational and governance arrangements3 - and how they are playing out in what we refer to as a ‘period of adjustment and rationalisation’ under the new Secretary of State, Ed Balls.

Curriculum and qualifications

The Government’s 14-19 curriculum and qualifications strategy can be seen to have moved through four distinct but overlapping phases since the publication of its Green Paper, 14-19 Education: Extending Opportunities, Raising Standards (DfES 2002).

There was, however, a long pre-history of debate and discussion about 14-19 developments dating back to the late-1980s. Some of this was government inspired, for example the Extension phase of the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI)4 and the Conservative’s eminently forgettable 14-19 White Paper (DfEE 1996), but most of it was not. The real commitment to a 14-19 phase and imaginative ideas about its development came from teacher unions and professional associations, political think tanks, the Labour and Liberal parties in Opposition and a variety of national agencies (see Hodgson and Spours 1997 for more detail). The creation of a 14-19 phase was seen as a way of developing a more unified and comprehensive upper secondary system in England (Hodgson and Spours 2003).

On coming to power in 1997, having cast aside its innovative 14-19 policy document Aiming Higher (Labour Party 1996), New Labour focused on 16-19 advanced level reforms known as Curriculum 20005, and the reorganisation of the post-compulsory education and training governance landscape under the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) which, in 2001, became responsible for all post-16 learning outside of higher education. Official government 14-19 policy only emerged in 2002. The significance of this late arrival was that leading sections of the education profession had already developed their own vision of a 14-19 phase during the preceding decade or so (e.g. NAHT 1987, SHA 1994, NUT 1995). It was not a history to which the Government, at this stage, paid much regard.


In 2001 in Schools Achieving Success (DfES 2001) Estelle Morris, Secretary of State for Education, laid out plans for modernization of the secondary curriculum and

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3 There is a third important strand of reform, the work-based route and apprenticeship, which we are unable to cover here but which has been well-documented elsewhere (e.g. Fuller and Unwin 2007, Nuffield 14-19 Review 2008a and 2008b).
4 TVEI was first introduced in 1983 as a pilot in only a small number of Local Education Authorities (LEAs) but was extended all LEAs in 1987. Central government channelled money through these bodies for the introduction of more practical, technical and vocational learning and qualifications into the curriculum of 14-18 year olds.
5 Curriculum 2000 contained three main reforms – a new two-stage A Level made up of AS and A2 components; an Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education (AVCE), designed to be closely aligned with A Levels to promote mixing of general and vocational study; and the introduction of a new Key Skills qualification that was intended to be taken alongside the other two qualifications to broaden advanced level study and to improve skills levels among young people.
promised to publish a consultation document, which emerged as *14-19 Education: Extending Opportunities, Raising Standards* (DfES 2002). Its main proposals were:

- to reduce the level of prescription at Key Stage 4 of the National Curriculum;
- to offer more opportunities for vocational learning;
- an entitlement to a Modern Apprenticeship place for all 16 to 17 year olds with five General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) passes including English and maths;
- a ‘matriculation diploma’ at Intermediate, Advanced and Higher levels overarching existing qualifications.

While representatives of the education profession broadly welcomed the focus on 14-19 and flexibility in Key Stage 4, many of the Green Paper proposals were rejected (e.g. AoC 2002, ATL 2002). These organisations, along with many others who responded to the consultation (there were almost 2000 written responses), felt that more radical reform affecting GCSEs and A Levels, as well as vocational awards, was required and that the matriculation diplomas would merely constitute ‘weak wrappers’ around existing inadequate qualifications (Hodgson and Spours 2003).

The demands for a more radical approach to 14-19 reform were fuelled by two other factors. The first was the so-called A Level grading crisis in the summer of 2002, in which an awarding body was accused of manipulating grades in order to depress pass rates in the new A Levels (Richardson 2007) and which, temporarily at least, shook ministerial faith in the A Level ‘gold standard’. The second was the appointment of David Miliband as Minister for School Standards. Unlike other education ministers at this time, Miliband, a co-author of the Institute for Public Policy (IPPR) *A British Baccalaureate* (Finegold et al. 1990), was familiar with the critique of an academic/vocational divide and the concept of a more unified curriculum and qualifications approach. He was, therefore, willing to see this strand of thinking contribute to the 14-19 reform process.

The Government’s response to the consultation on the Green Paper, was *14-19 Excellence and Opportunity* (DfES 2003) which differed in both tone and analysis from its earlier Green Paper. It criticized the role of GCSE, suggesting that many young people were ‘bored by their GCSE studies’ (p. 10). A Levels, despite the *Curriculum 2000* reforms, were described as providing narrow programmes of study. It concluded with a remit for an independent working group to consider three strategic directions for change – coherence in 14-19 learning programmes for all young people; making assessment arrangements more appropriate and manageable; and developing a unified framework of qualifications. The scene was set for two years of unprecedented discussion about a new long-term vision for 14-19 education and training.


Throughout the latter half of 2003 until October 2004, as a result of the Tomlinson Review, 14-19 education and training became a high profile topic of public debate for the first time in England, involving large numbers of policy-makers and researchers and thousands of education professionals. The central proposal in the Tomlinson Final Report was for a new single diploma system that would gradually subsume all existing qualifications for 14-19 year olds from Entry to Advanced Level (Working Group on 14-19 Reform 2004). This period of debate and the emerging proposals generated widespread anticipation of radical change and there was considerable
professional excitement about the possibility of holistic rather than piecemeal reform (e.g. Stanistreet 2004, Flint 2004). Even those newspapers not normally supportive of the Government were cautiously positive (e.g. Clare 2004, Financial Times 2004).

With education ministers making encouraging noises, all stakeholder groups having been consulted and the A Level brand, for so long the sticking point for radical change, having been tarnished as a result of the ‘crises’ in the summer of 2002, the scene was set for a positive government response to the efforts of the Working Group on 14-19 Reform. However, this is not what happened. While education ministers praised the Tomlinson Final Report when it was launched on the 18th October and was being warmly received by the media (e.g. BBC News 2004), the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, in a speech to the Confederation of British Industry stated ‘GCSEs and A Levels will stay. So will externally marked exams’ (Blair 2004). There was no mention in his speech of the Diploma system. The Government’s retreat from radical reform was reinforced by changes to the education ministerial team, which had overseen and supported the Tomlinson Working Group.


In February 2005, Ruth Kelly, the new Secretary of State for Education, published the Government’s official response to the Tomlinson Final Report. The White Paper 14-19 Education and Skills (DfES 2005a), rejected the main Tomlinson recommendation for a unified multi-level diploma system. Instead, it proposed the development of 14 lines of ‘Specialised Diplomas’ to provide a ladder of progression of broad vocational qualifications throughout the 14-19 phase, together with modifications to GCSE and A Level specifications. The new qualifications formed the centre-piece of the first ever statutory 14-19 National Entitlement for learners, aimed at providing both breadth and choice of study and institutional setting.

The White Paper’s analysis of the problems facing the 14-19 phase was very different from that of both the Tomlinson reports and the Government’s own previous document, 14-19: Opportunity and Excellence (DfES 2003). Its perspective on the weaknesses of the English system was almost identical to that of the 2002 14-19 Green Paper. It saw the problem, once again, in terms of basic skills and weak vocational provision. On the other hand, A Levels and GCSEs were viewed as ‘by far the most well recognized and understood route to success’ (DfES 2005a: 19) and would be retained ‘as cornerstones of the new system’ (p. 6). What followed this analysis was a selective ‘cherry-picking’ of the Tomlinson proposals. Its broad unified diploma template was applied to the new Specialised Diplomas that would co-exist alongside GCSEs and A Levels, thus becoming alternatives to these established qualifications, rather than the basis for the 14-19 system as a whole. Moreover, the Tomlinson principle of inclusivity would be further compromised. The Diplomas in the White Paper were confined to Levels 1-3, leaving Entry Level adrift. Finally, the Tomlinson proposals for more internal professional-led assessment were restricted to Key Stage 3, leaving 14-19 qualifications still largely driven by external examinations. What could be seen as a divided approach to qualifications reform was partially ameliorated by a stress on institutional collaboration to support the new 14-19 Entitlement.

The centre-piece of the Government’s 14-19 reforms were the new Diplomas of which there were 14 original Lines, the first five of which – IT; Society, Health and Development; Construction and the Built Environment; Engineering; Creative and Media – were available from September 2008. A further five – Land-based and
Environmental; Manufacturing; Hair and Beauty; Business Administration and Finance and Hospitality - will be offered from September 2009. The final four Lines – Public Services; Sport and Leisure; Retail and Travel and Tourism – will be introduced from September 2010. The Diplomas are ‘composite’ awards comprising three elements – Principal Learning, which is sector specific; Generic Learning, which aims to develop personal and learning skills including English, mathematics and IT; and Additional/Specialist Learning, which can include other qualifications and units that allow learners to tailor their programme to meet individual aspirations.

The changes to GCSE and A Level aimed to deflect criticism about falling standards in general education and to reinforce public trust in the qualifications system following problems with the Curriculum 2000 reforms (see Hodgson and Spours 2003, Fisher 2007, Wilde and Wright 2007). The new A Level specifications, on offer from September 2008, have four rather than six units to limit the amount of assessment in these qualifications and to offer more space to study a subject in depth. A related change is the introduction into the A2 of more ‘stretching questions’ which means fewer short answers, more extended writing and more synoptic questions, as well as an A* grade for the very highest achievers. In addition, coursework is only allowable in a minority of subjects (e.g. Art and Design and PE) and all candidates will have to demonstrate a high quality of written communication (DCSF 2007a).

The Government’s 2002 14-19 Green Paper talked of GCSEs moving from a school-leaving examination to a ‘progress check’. The 2005 14-19 White Paper, however, emphasised the continued role of GCSE as a 16+ threshold by asserting it was widely recognised by parents and respected internationally and should, therefore, remain. The role of GCSE as an important educational milestone was further strengthened by changes to performance tables to include a higher threshold for the 5A*-C benchmark by including English and Mathematics GCSE. This focus on improving basic skills can also be seen in the development of the new Functional Skills qualifications in English, Mathematics and ICT (DCSF 2007b). These are to be built into the revised GCSEs in these areas, as well as forming a compulsory part of the new Diplomas. A further important change to these qualifications, referred to as ‘toughening GCSEs’, is the replacement of course-work by ‘controlled assessments’ (DCSF 2007b).

The publication of the 14-19 White Paper was swiftly followed by a detailed 14-19 Implementation Plan (DfES 2005b), with challenging deadlines for bringing in the new qualifications. This signalled the end of consultation and the move to a period of rapid implementation within a politically determined timetable. The period 2005-7 could also be seen as a period of policy exclusion, where those with expertise and knowledge of qualifications’ development and implementation were marginalized, as the government gave the central role for the design of the new Diplomas to employer-led Diploma Development Partnerships (HoC 2007).


In some respects, from Summer 2007 the reconfigured Government under Prime Minister Gordon Brown sought to bring about changes in the tone and content of 14-19 policy. The first real example was in October 2007 when Ed Balls, the first Secretary of State at the new Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), announced the introduction of three new lines of Diplomas in Science,
Languages and Humanities and set a date for the review of the 14-19 reforms as a whole in 2013 (DCSF 2007c).

The idea of Diplomas moving from their original position as vocational qualifications to embrace more general education was further reinforced by the announcement in March 2008 of Extended Diplomas\(^6\) that would encourage the greater mixing of general and vocational study, thus appearing to challenge the academic/vocational divide.

This was followed in June 2008 by a consultation document on the Government’s 14-19 Qualifications Strategy (DCSF 2008b), which claimed that it wished to take a ‘comprehensive’ approach to 14-19 qualifications through the establishment of four ‘routes’ – GCSEs and A Levels; Diplomas; Apprenticeship; and the Foundation Learning Tier for those not yet ready for the other three routes. As part of this rationalization, the consultation document also suggested that, over time, Diplomas would subsume and replace other broad vocational qualifications, such as BTEC awards.

Taken together, these three developments might be seen as a post-hoc tidying up of the somewhat disparate qualifications developments that had been taking place as part of the 14-19 Implementation Plan. It is for these reasons that we have characterized this period as one of ‘rationalization’. However, a less charitable view might be that the Secretary of State was simply attempting to save the Diploma project, which was being heavily criticized from a number of directions, including the Select Committee (HoC 2007), and which, by 2007, appeared to be in danger of collapsing;\(^7\) hence our term ‘adjustment’. Whichever interpretation one takes, it is clear that the introduction of the three new general Diploma lines and the Extended Diplomas was a concerted attempt to win over education professionals, particularly the universities and teacher unions, to the Diplomas.

Comments from policy actors we interviewed in Autumn 2007 suggest that Ed Balls’ strategy was largely successful. Several of our interviewees commented on what they saw as a new climate in policy-making. The announcement of the three new diplomas was seen as a ‘step in the right direction’ (PA 19) and a ‘huge cultural shift...because it has broken the link between Diplomas being associated with sectors’ (PA14). In most interviewees’ minds, the perceived change in policy had resulted from what one described as ‘a shift in political personnel and political beliefs’ (PA 5).

At the same time, as the report on responses to the consultation on Promoting achievement, valuing success: a strategy for 14-19 qualifications. (DCSF 2008d) demonstrates, the proposal to rationalize the qualifications system into four main routes, has generated a mixed response. There is support for the principle of simplification to create a ‘more comprehensive and coherent qualifications offer for all young people’, although it is difficult to see how anyone could disagree with this. However, there were clear concerns about lack of flexibility of the proposed progression routes and the threat to established qualifications, such as BTEC awards. Moreover, the respondents offered strong support for what could be

\(^6\) Extended Diplomas, available from 2011, will be designed to extend each of the 17 Diploma lines and are expected to be equivalent to 4.5 A levels at the Advanced level, 9 GCSEs at the Higher level and 7 GCSEs at the Foundation level (DCSF 2008a).

\(^7\) Originally the Government had announced an expectation that over 40,000 learners would be taking Diplomas in September 2006. In fact, the figure is about 20,000. The DCSF put a brave face on the numbers with its Press Release ‘Balls puts quality first’ (DCSF 2008c)
regarded as inclusive reforms – a credit based framework for 14-19 qualifications and an effective Foundation Learning Tier for learners at Entry and Level 1.

Institutional arrangements and governance

While the main focus of the English 14-19 reform proposals has been on changes to qualifications, the organisational arrangements for delivering the new qualifications have been an important parallel strand. Here the Government's policy, since 2002, has been based on what some see as two incompatible approaches. All 14-19 policy documents, and increasingly from the 2005 White Paper, have stressed the need for collaboration between schools, colleges and work-based learning providers in order to offer a more diverse range of courses, particularly those leading to vocational qualifications. Moreover, considerable funding has been injected into the system through both the ‘Increased Flexibility Programme’, which encouraged schools and colleges to provide more practical experiences for 14-16 years olds, and 14-19 Pathfinders designed to encourage institutional collaboration. This emphasis on partnership working has taken place, however, within the wider public sector reform agenda of encouraging institutional specialisation and competition to drive up standards (PMSU 2006). The tension between institutional competition and collaboration has been widely criticised by researchers (e.g. Hodgson and Spours 2006; Fletcher and Perry 2008); practitioner organisations (e.g. NUT/UCU 2008, NAHT 2008, ACSL 2008) and policy-makers (e.g. NAO 2007) alike.

In terms of governance of the 14-19 system, it is possible to make a distinction between the years 2001-4 and 2005-8. The former could be seen as a period of strong ‘top-down’ policy steering, which privileged the national and institutional levels of governance and reduced the role of local government (Coffield et al. 2008). During this period, central government worked through its arms length agency, the LSC, to organise 16-19 provision at the local level within a managed education market. The period from 2005 onwards, on the other hand, has seen the gradual re-emergence of the local authority (LA) as it has being given a strategic lead in 14-19 education and training (DFES 2005a) as part of a move towards greater devolution and partnership working at the local level (DCLG 2006).

However, as we have highlighted already, the LA has to work with a complex mosaic of institutions, only some of which they fund. All of these providers have a high degree of autonomy and are primarily responsible to their individual governing bodies and institutional behaviour continues to be influenced by a range of policy steering mechanisms (e.g. funding, targets, performance tables and inspection), some of which encourage competition and others of which promote collaboration (Nuffield 14-19 Review 2007).

One of the first acts of the new Brown Administration was to introduce a series of ‘Machinery of Government’ changes, under which the Department for Education and Skills was replaced by two new ministries: the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS). This reorganisation appeared to signal a movement away from the idea of single post-16 learning and skills sector, which was underpinned by the creation of the LSC in 2001, towards a new bifurcated system of 14-19 and adult skills from 19+.

Within what we have termed the ‘period of adjustment’, the Brown Government published Raising Expectations: enabling the system to deliver (DCSF/DIUS 2008), a consultation paper on the new governance arrangements for 14+ education and
training. This document gives LAs the responsibility for leading, funding and commissioning 14-19 provision, thus extending their leadership of Children’s Trusts’ arrangements to encompass the funding and organisation of 16-19 learning. In their new role as ‘strategic commissioner’, LAs will be required to produce a local commissioning plan for the education and training of young people. In recognition of the fact that many them will be in non-school learning environments and may wish to travel beyond LA boundaries in order to study or train, it is suggested that there should be a role for decision-making at sub-regional, regional and national, as well as local level. LAs will be expected to cluster together in sub-regional groupings to commission provision. At regional level, LA clusters will be expected to work with the Regional Development Agency (RDA), the regional Government Office and the new Skills Funding Agency (SFA), which will fund adult skills development, to develop a regional strategy. In addition, a new national organisation, The Young People’s Learning Agency (YPLA), will be given responsibility for funding local plans and for arbitrating between LAs. These new organisations replace the LSC and will come into operation from September 2010.

The attempt to give LAs a planning role in relation to 14-19 education and training, while at the same time promoting a post-19 market for adult learning and skills could be seen as the driving motivation for the splitting of the DfES into two new departments. This is leading to an increasingly complex governance landscape in which the Government is being compelled to form new agencies to straddle the age-based bifurcation. Our initial observation of the new 14-19 arrangements is that they constitute a highly complex set of overlapping levels of governance and new relationships, many of which are untried and will be subject to different policy steers. They are also vulnerable to the accusation of bureaucracy, as the Conservatives have highlighted in a recent policy document (Conservative Party 2008).

**Summary - the Government’s adaptive neo-liberal reform approach**

With the exception of the 2003-4 period of debate, a short history of the Government’s approach to 14-19 reform reveals different dimensions of an ‘adaptive neo-liberal’ reform model (Newman 2001) in which dominant themes of new public management and curriculum division have been offset by a number of subordinate social democratic measures, or what Hall (2003) refers to as New Labour’s ‘Double Shuffle’.

In the two areas of policy analysed in this paper, the dominant theme in relation to curriculum and qualifications has been a strategy of ‘preservation/innovation’ in relation to curriculum and qualifications - the retention of historically recognisable qualifications, such as GCSEs and A Levels while, at the same time, the development of an entirely new suite of alternative qualifications, the 14-19 Diplomas (Hayward et al. forthcoming). In the area of organisation and governance, the Government’s dominant strategy has been institutional competition, reinforced by league tables. Holding these two dominant strands together has been a top-down approach to the policy process marked, in particular, by an implementation phase in which debate has been discouraged and social partners either co-opted or marginalised.

Accompanying this dominant policy pattern have been a number of subordinate progressive and inclusive reform themes aimed at addressing key policy issues and meeting some of the concerns of the social partners. In terms of qualifications and curriculum, these include designing Diplomas to contain both vocational and general education, proposing a move to a fully credit-based qualification offer by 2013 and
developing a Foundation Learning Tier. With regards to organisation and governance, progressive measures include an emphasis on institutional collaboration and the allocation of a strategic role for LAs in the planning of 14-19 provision in a locality, thus bringing a new degree of democratic legitimacy to the policy process.

The immediate effect of this adaptive neo-liberal strategy, the pursuit of dominant and subordinate policy agendas, has been the production of policy and organisational complexity and even overload, which arguably discourages practitioners from contemplating more fundamental change, even though they may be dissatisfied with the status quo. The most negative outcomes for learners, however, arise from curriculum division and institutional competition. The first and most obvious is the continuing low status of vocational education, which in a divided system tends to attract those excluded from general education. A second is the equation of institutional competition with social and educational division as FE colleges, for example, cater for more than their fair share of learners from lower social and ethnic groups (Fletcher and Perry 2008). Third, the quality of learning for all young people has suffered as institutions pursue ‘results’ in a competitive environment, rather than concentrating on learning that can genuinely provide knowledge and skills for the future (Nuffield 14-19 Review 2008c).

ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES

The Government’s strategy for 14-19 education and training has been contested since its formal appearance in 2002. In this section, we analyse the position of teacher unions and education professional associations, together with sections of the research and policy communities, to assess the extent to which an alternative model of 14-19 reform exists in 2008. As we have seen, viewed historically, there is certainly evidence for such a perspective, reflected in more than 30 blueprints and strategies for a unified system in the early-mid 1990s (see Hodgson and Spours 1997). This alternative perspective crystallised in widespread professional and political support for the Tomlinson unified diploma proposals in 2004. As one of our interviewees remarked:

I think when Tomlinson had a groundswell of people behind him, it felt unanimous and it felt unstoppable. And, in a sense, that was because there was passion in the way that Mike and the people who worked with him described the whole thing. They weren’t just committed, they were passionately committed. And it wasn’t just the right thing to do, it was the only thing to do. (PA 1)

Here, however, we will focus attention on the period since the publication of the 14-19 White Paper in 2005 to see how far this perspective has evolved in the Government’s period of implementation.

The professional voice

The professional mood about the Government’s 14-19 strategy is quite difficult to gauge, although, as we will see, recent statements from professional associations and responses to consultations provide a flavour. The statements are more coherent and provide a sense of an alternative, whereas the responses to consultations tell us what stakeholders think about government policy within the bounds of the track-
based framework of the 2005 14-19 White Paper, which is all that respondents are asked to comment on. Consultation of this type does not make space for challenges to the assumptions on which policy is based and certainly these types of comment are not reported. In addition, there is more anecdotal evidence from discussions and interviews with practitioners, policy-makers and researchers collected, for example, by the Nuffield 14-19 Review, the 14-19 Alliance and through 14-19 practitioner and local authority advisor networks such as LEACAN.

The initial anger and frustration about the rejection of Tomlinson has waned over the last four years, giving way to a mix of resignation, pragmatism and the search for a longer road of reform. Taking into account both public and private sentiments, the prevailing mood also appears to be one of scepticism and lack of enthusiasm. It should be noted that the DCSF received only 173 responses to its latest web-based consultation on 14-19 qualifications (DCSF 2008d), compared to over 2000 in response to its first Green Paper in 2002.

More detailed evidence also suggests a complex picture. Looking across a range of recent documents from teacher unions, educational professional associations and the research community there is a surface consensus with regards to broad policy aims. There is little argument about the need to broaden opportunities for learner engagement with 14-19 study through greater choice of courses; to raise levels of achievement and post-16 participation and to ‘personalise’ the curriculum. However, there is considerable debate about the kind of system required to deliver these aims and marked criticism of the Government’s policy approach. Leading sections of the practitioner and research communities also promote distinctive reform aims, for example the Nuffield 14-19 Review’s statement that the aim of government should be to encourage the formation of an ‘educated 19 year old’ (Hayward et al. forthcoming).

Support for Tomlinson tinged by pragmatism

For most of the main teacher unions and professional associations, the Tomlinson proposals still remain, four years on, the main reference point for 14-19 reform and the source of criticism of government policy. The following statement from the National Association of Headteachers (NAHT) broadly reflects that consensus:

In purely curriculum terms, the decision to reject a carefully-worked approach, developed by some of the leading educational thinkers in 2004 has led to a confused and chaotic landscape as partial amendments are made to nudge towards the very approach which had been rejected. This is not a basis on which a coherent 14-19 strategy can be taken forward (NAHT 2008).

However, a study of recent announcements by these representatives of teachers and lecturers reveals a range of responses in relation to the era of the White Paper since 2005. The most comprehensive statement has come from the National Union of Teachers (NUT) and the Universities’ and Colleges’ Union (UCU) in a recent joint document on 14-19 reform (NUT/UCU(2008). They argue for an explicit ‘equality, inclusivity and social justice agenda’ with support for an ‘ambitious’ reform approach, conducted at a ‘manageable pace for learners, teachers, lecturers and others’ (p. 3).

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8 The Nuffield 14-19 Review has regularly held seminars on key issues related to 14-19 education and training, with participants from the policy, researcher and practitioner communities (see www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk). The 14-19 Alliance is a more informal group of representatives from teacher unions and professional associations; awarding bodies; researchers and government agencies with an interest in reform and which meets about six times per year. For LEACAN see (http://www.leacan.org.uk/).
A centre-piece remains the unified diploma system proposed by Tomlinson. The NAHT analysis and position is very close to that of the NUT/UCU.

Others continue to promote a unifying perspective while attempting to push government policy slowly in this direction. The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), for example, welcomed the Government’s 14-19 Qualifications Strategy as a move in this direction and, in particular, warmly receiving the proposal for a credit framework (ASCL 2008). The Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) has a similar perspective, although it characterises its own position as ‘pragmatic in accepting that Tomlinson has been, for the moment at least, cast aside’ (ATL 2008: 1). ATL goes on to criticise Government for its track-based approach and argues for a development path for the Diplomas that challenges the academic/vocational divide (ATL 2008). At the far end of the spectrum lies the Headmasters’ Conference (HMC), which represents the most prestigious schools in the independent sector. It’s policy summary states that independent schools will be relatively pleased with the White Paper era insofar as there appears to be a degree of policy stability; ‘A Levels appear to have been saved’; there is a choice of qualifications (e.g. IB, Pre-U and AQA Bac) to entice schools who want to be more adventurous and no compulsion to take up the Diplomas (HMC 2008). This report suggests that the Diplomas, the Government’s flagship reform, will make little headway in the independent sector. There is also a warning from HMC that qualifications pluralism will produce unwanted complexity.

The pragmatism of teacher unions and professional associations simply reflects the views of practitioners on the ground. With the needs of learners uppermost in their minds, they certainly do not want the Diplomas to fail, but anecdotal evidence suggests that most see Diplomas fitting into a niche or filling a gap rather than transforming the landscape (Nuffield 14-19 Review 2008d). Practitioners also value existing qualifications such as BTEC awards, reflected in responses to the Government’s recent 14-19 qualifications strategy consultation (DCSF 2008d). While many, however, remain doubtful of the added value of the Diplomas, they will support their introduction if the new qualification helps to improve the quality of the curriculum. There is evidence from 14-19 Pathfinders that Diplomas are more likely to make a contribution pre-16 as part of the continued diversification of Key Stage 4, compared with post-16, where they will compete with popular BTEC and CGLI awards. Moreover, the models of local implementation being heavily supported by QCA, for example in Kingswood and Wolverhampton, have a definite Tomlinson flavour insofar as they take a comprehensive and inclusive view of 14-19 reform9. It would seem, therefore, that spaces for innovation are being created and diverse visions of 14-19 can thrive at the local level as practitioners endeavour to improve learning opportunities.

Influential sections of the research community, such as Geoff Stanton and Mick Fletcher, Jeremy Higham and David Yeomans and Geoff Hayward and colleagues (see Nuffield website – www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk), while understanding this pragmatism, remain highly critical of government policy. All argue for a ‘strong vocational education’, although there are differences of view as to whether this can be achieved through proposals for a unified system (e.g. Hodgson and Spours 2008) or whether it is better simply to concentrate on the building of a strong vocational system of distinctive qualifications and support structure (see Stanton 2008).

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9 Evidence of this comes from presentations by Peter Hawthorne (14-19 Co-ordinator for Wolverhampton) to the Post-14 Network at the Institute of Education, University of London (2008) and David Turrell (Chair of the Kingswood Partnership) to the Nuffield 14-19 Review (2007).
Clarity of view on organisation, governance and the policy process

The teacher unions and professional associations, on the other hand, have clear views on how the reforms should be delivered. Their criticism of the Government’s approach is, if anything, harsher here than in relation to curriculum and qualifications, because they see rushed approaches to reform endangering the stability that both teachers and learners need for effective education. As one of our policy actor interviewees reflected:

My impression of the school and college system is that there is an overload of change...because actually when push comes to shove it’s about the quality of delivery, it’s about people being able to do a good job with the students they’ve got in front of them and that’s very difficult when they’re having to take on new initiatives all the time. (PA 2)

In their documentation, practitioner bodies are extremely critical of the culture of institutional competition; the rushed nature of the policy process; the exclusion of the professional voice; the focus on accountability, the lack of quality CPD and unnecessary complexity of policy. A comment from an NASUWT official, quoted in The Observer (Hill 2008), captures the professional disquiet at the Government’s approach to education more broadly: ‘There is a surfeit of government initiatives, pressures of assessment, targets and inspection. Our vocation has become a political football.’

More recently, there has also been a view that LAs may not be up to the task of leading 14-19. This is captured in the following quotation from another of our policy actor interviewees:

They’re (LAs) undergoing great changes at the moment into Children’s Services and so what used to be an LEA with teams, which had education as their centre, has now become part of a much larger structure and smaller units. 14-19 development has got lost in that change and what we’re finding is that 14-19 teams are disappearing in terms of status and clout and you do have to have clout to bring about change. (PA 22)

Practitioner representatives argue for greater professional involvement in the policy process and the importance of teacher and lecturer feedback in order that they can offer their expertise and have confidence in the reforms (NUT/UCU 2008).

Members of the research community broadly concur with these views and have added historical and international perspectives concerned with resistance to policy learning (e.g. Higham and Yeomans 2007). Furthermore, they have proposed alternative models of post-14 organisation and governance, notably the development of ‘strongly collaborative local learning systems’ (Hodgson and Spours 2006), a more tertiary approach to post-16 organisation (e.g. Fletcher and Perry 2008) and a new balance of national, regional and local governance, as part of what has been termed a ‘devolved social partnership approach’ to the learning and skills sector (Coffield et al. 2008).
Pragmatism and another round of the ‘Double Shuffle’

As we have seen, the ‘Double Shuffle’ refers to the simultaneous pursuit of two agendas – dominant neo-liberal and subordinate social democratic. This concept can be used not only to describe the Government’s 14-19 strategy, but also the perspectives of social partners. For example, the Government’s appointed 14-19 Expert Group, QCA, some educational professional associations and, notably, Sir Mike Tomlinson, support what can be described as the ‘long’ road to reform in response to the Government’s rejection of a unified system in 2004. They assert that the accretion of progressive policies on top of the existing settlement will not only benefit learners, but could eventually deliver a more unified and coherent 14-19 system. These sentiments are reflected in a quotation from one of our policy actor interviewees:

> If you take the basic structure of the Diploma, which says that you need this much functional skills, you need this much personal learning and thinking skills and you need this much work experience and you need this much of a coherent learning programme and this much optional extra... it starts to give you more of what Tomlinson envisaged as an overarching diploma, where everything is fitted in. (PA 21)

This perspective manifests itself in support for a range of ‘progressive’ measures in the context of a divided system - the 14-19 Diplomas as a way of introducing the diploma concept into the English system; advocacy of the three new general education Diploma Lines and Extended Diplomas to challenge the academic/vocational divide; the introduction of a credit framework to ensure learning flexibility and progression; the Foundation Learning Tier to provide inclusion and the Extended Project to encourage quality of learning. While a strong case can be made to welcome all these measures, we suggest there are dangers with a strategy of ‘accretion’.

The first is that it may lead to weak and partial outcomes that could undermine the reputation of the reforms at the outset (e.g. Diplomas continue to be overshadowed by A Levels and a voluntary Extended Project may not gain sufficient learner, higher education and professional support to establish its currency). Second, policy-makers may over-estimate changes that result from an isolated act of reform. The current Secretary of State for Education, Ed Balls, provided a shining example of this with his assertion that ‘Diplomas could become the qualification of choice’ (DCSF 2007c). He was hoping that in the next five years learners would do the Government’s job and would become the abolishers of A Levels. The third effect is additional complexity and overload, which not only deflects professionals from the core business of teaching and learning, but which can also diminish their appetite for more fundamental reform; hence the reservations and questions from consultation responses regarding the Government’s wish to explore the ‘introduction of a credit-based framework for 14-19 qualifications by 2013’.

While supporting the measure in principle because of the promise of system simplification, small-step learning and transferability of credit for progression, many respondents to the on-line consultation thought that to make a credit system work, it would have to encompass all qualifications and interface with all types of learning, including HE. They were concerned how it would relate to existing policies and policy levers, such as league tables, and were sceptical as to whether it could be introduced by 2013 (DCSF 2008d).
convincing that the Government has thought it through and is serious about the scale of reform required.

Without a clear vision of the direction of reform and how each policy is contributing to it, the danger with accretion is that reformers become part of the Double Shuffle. Piecemeal reforms simply result in adjustments to a divisive system and may discredit progressive measures that will be seen as weak and complex. In previous work we have made a distinction between what we term ‘incrementalism’ and ‘strategic gradualism’ (Hodgson and Spours 2003). By incrementalism we referred to New Labour’s gradual accretion of policy without indicating an end-point or goal. Strategic gradualism, on the other hand, combines an explicit long-term goal with clear steps and stages towards it. Put another way, strategic gradualism combines vision with concern for day-day-improvements provided by the on-going reform process. This was graphically captured by one of our policy actors:

If people are to invest their time and energy and commitment towards something, they need to know it’s going somewhere and why they’re doing it. So, you know, you might walk a mile if you knew where you were going, but if I ask you to walk a mile over rough terrain and I can’t tell you where you’re going and why you’re going there, you’re going to be less likely to do it. (PA 10)

There is an alternative policy framework

The elements of an alternative perspective and vision of an end-goal certainly exist and have been emerging, albeit unevenly, for nearly two decades in non-government organisations. We suggest presently it comprises three major dimensions:

- a unified curriculum and qualifications system, based on an English Baccalaureate and underpinned by a credit framework;
- strongly collaborative local learning systems as part of a devolved social partnership approach to wider governance and policy-making;
- a social partnership approach to work-based learning (not considered here).

The one with the longest history is curriculum and qualifications around which there is a broad, though by no means unanimous, consensus for a unified diploma system. The organisational and governance dimensions are relatively recent additions, spurred on by the Government’s own reform of the learning and skills sector and its policy emphasis on collaboration. These two dimensions have been brought together into a single reform framework (e.g. Hodgson and Spours 2004, Hodgson and Spours 2008 and Coffield et al. 2008), but have not been elaborated into a concrete strategy.

It is, therefore, important to stimulate debate and encourage controversy in order to develop the approach further and to create a broader consensus around key issues such as:

- how to build on the best of current curriculum and qualifications within a more unified framework;
- how far to pursue the Government’s Diploma reform approach and whether it can evolve into a more unified system;
• whether a strongly vocational route can be pursued as part of a unified system or as a separate route;
• the political viability of a regulatory and social partnership approach with employers.

Competing or overlapping approaches – the battle for ‘progressive pragmatism’

Despite the fact that we have made a distinction in this article between two reform approaches, they are not experienced as opposites as the policy process is played out at national, regional and local levels. While government policy is dominant at the national level, the alternative perspective finds ‘political space’ at regional, local and institutional levels at different points in the policy cycle (Hodgson and Spours 2006). Moreover, new debates and possibilities arise when the Government’s strategy encounters particular difficulties. In an era of 14-19 implementation, where debate has been avoided, a key issue will be how the different social partners can be brought together to develop the dimensions of a new national approach, but also how they collaborate locally and regionally to ensure that learners, particularly the most vulnerable, do not lose out. The battle between the two perspectives will, therefore, not just be about a vision of the future, but how to work for ‘progressive pragmatism’.
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