

## COMMENTARY

### Students' views and qualification policy development: perspectives on failed vocationally related policies

Tina Isaacs\*

*Institute of Education, University of London, London, UK*

Despite the fact that students are often articulate about qualifications policy matters, their perspectives are rarely listened to. This is because governments shape qualifications policy according to pre-set beliefs and are unwilling to countenance dissonant or outsider views. Using the Diploma qualification and inclusion of vocational qualifications as General Certificate of Secondary Education and A level equivalents for league tables as examples, this commentary complements this edition's main articles through exploring why these policies failed, as well as why myriad voices went unheeded.

**Keywords:** Diploma; 14-19 education; education policy; vocational qualifications; qualifications development

The articles in this volume are largely based on interviews with 14- to 19-year-old students that were part of the Centre Research Study (hereafter referred to as the CReSt study). They show that young people are articulate about their goals and aspirations but that their perspectives are rarely listened to outside of the institutions in which they learn (and sometimes not even within these institutions, see Elwood in this edition). They certainly have no real voice in qualifications policy-making; even though agencies have organised student panels, conducted student surveys and/or held student focus groups. Governments decide structure, governance, curriculum and assessment matters largely to complement their political philosophies and ignore those who disagree with them, students or otherwise (Highman and Yeomans 2011; Hodgson and Spours 2011). Education policy-makers, while professing always to have students' best interests at heart, chop and change the teaching, learning and assessment landscape at speed, and sometimes with disregard for the very students they profess to be championing (see Elwood in this edition).

The CReSt study itself was an excellent example of the precarious nature of listening to stakeholders' views in contributing to education policy. Originally meant as a five-year study to examine the impact of the wider 14-19 curriculum, qualifications and assessment reform programme on schools and colleges, funding for CReST was withdrawn with the commencement of the Coalition government.

At the time of the introduction of the Labour government's reform programme, I was first Head of the 14-19 Team at the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), then Head of 14-19 Regulation at Ofqual so could glimpse first-hand how the various policies were being implemented. Most interestingly, from the standpoint of this special issue dedicated to student perspectives, was the introduction of the Diploma qualification, which the government claimed would best serve the needs and desires of the students about whom

---

\*Email: [t.isaacs@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:t.isaacs@ioe.ac.uk)

Duffy and Elwood, Rose and Baird and O'Boyle in this edition write so persuasively, and the inclusion of vocationally related qualifications in performance tables, which perversely led to students being entered onto qualifications that would ill serve them in later life.

For lower achievers, arguably the students to whose perspectives least attention is paid, successive governments of all political persuasions have introduced vocationally related qualifications.<sup>1</sup> As I have written elsewhere (Isaacs 2013b), these qualifications have myriad (and conflicting) expectations attached to them. They are supposed to motivate the disaffected about whom Duffy and Elwood write, (see this edition) and those in danger of dropping out, about whom Feiler writes. In addition, the qualifications are supposed to prepare students for the world of work, solve basic literacy and numeracy problems, maintain high standards and 'parity of esteem' with academic qualifications, and lead to success in entry to selective higher education programmes.

The Labour government believed strongly in efficacy of vocationally related qualifications. It also believed in centralised, national provision and so promoted nationally based qualifications such as General National Vocational Qualification, Vocational Certificate of Education, applied General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSEs), applied A levels and the Diploma. It also expanded the qualifications that counted toward key targets within achievement and attainment (performance) tables to include GCSE 'equivalents' – thousands of them, some of them notionally the size of four GCSEs. QCA (2002) claimed overwhelming school support to include vocationally related qualifications in performance tables, even though it recognised that schools would use qualifications to get the most points possible. As for the needs of students, the 2002 QCA report stated that 'in the majority of cases decisions will be made in students' best interests' (quoted in the Wolf 2011, 3). Schools quickly rushed to put students on these qualifications pathways. The *Wolf Review* (2011) cited extraordinary changes to the number of key stage 4 students enrolled in vocationally related qualifications at level 2. In 2003–2004, just under 2000 14- to 16-year olds were enrolled on these types of courses; but by 2009–2010 over 460,000 were. There were rumours that some schools forced their students onto vocationally related courses, on which staff believed students were more likely to get a C grade or above, which would then count for up to four grade Cs for performance table purposes, although their 'street value' turned out to be considerably less.

The *Wolf Review* (2011, 81) proved that schools were placing key stage 4 students on vocationally related qualifications 'for reasons which have nothing to do with their own long-term interests, within education or the labour market. They can and do find that they are unable, as a result, to progress to the courses they want and have been led to expect they will enter'. Students' future potential was being shamefully undermined; one assistant college principal told Wolf that:

the incentive for schools to provide qualifications for their pupils on the basis of the points they score is irresistible. It is not unusual for young people to have the 'equivalent' of 12–15 GCSEs but without a C or above in English or maths ... (T)he young people themselves (and their parents) then expect to progress to a level 3 qualification in FE ... but when they present at FE it is clear that their knowledge and understanding are poor. One sometimes wonders how much they have achieved ... (and) there is little option but to repeat a level 2 qualification. (Wolf 2011, 80–81)

The *Wolf Review* did not explore individual qualifications and so had nothing directly to say about the Diploma, which was developed in 2005 because of perceived deficiencies in vocational education and training. The Diploma was to fill what Hodgson and Spours (2007) characterise as the middle track, that is, situated between academic and occupational routes,

and was meant to attract students who were not yet ready to join the workforce, but were not enamoured of more traditional offerings. The Diplomas consisted of principal sector learning, a project, functional skills qualifications in English, Mathematics and Information and Communication Technology, additional qualifications of the students' (limited) choice, personal learning and thinking skills, and work experience. At level two, they were the equivalent in performance table points to seven GCSEs; at level 3, three and a half A levels. Largely internally assessed, Diplomas were meant to provide a less stultifying and examinations-based experience. Certainly, many of the students quoted in the articles for this issue spoke about wanting a more flexible curriculum offer, although tellingly they did not all characterise that flexibility in terms of vocational education.

QCA's CEO, Ken Boston, explicitly stated that the Diplomas were aimed at those who were not succeeding on GCSE and A level courses. To motivate them, 'better, stronger and more relevant' vocational content was necessary. However, the Diplomas also needed to attract the most able learners (Boston 2005). This attempt to be everything for everybody illustrates the conundrum that bedevils vocationally related provision in the UK – the assumption that vocational education motivates the less able and the disengaged, coupled with the insistence that it must allow learners to progress to selective programmes in higher education (Isaacs 2013a). Students themselves were not fooled, 'Basically, if you can't do A levels, you just do, like, a Diploma' (a student's view, quoted in Shepherd 2009).

Raffe and Spours' (2007) politicised model of policy-making posits that when potential policy learning from past practice – such as from older vocationally related qualifications – and politics conflict, any past evidence that undermines predetermined policy gets sidelined or ignored. The policy-makers at both the QCA and the then DfES were unwilling to take seriously any warnings from past developments because the idea that the Diploma would successfully bridge the vocational/academic divide and re-inspire a generation of students was sacrosanct, and any concerns were largely discounted because they did not support predetermined policy objectives. Policy-makers were so determined to use centrally driven vocational qualifications to solve curricular, pedagogic and social problems that they could not conceive that these particular qualifications might not suit students or their teachers (Highman and Yeomans 2011).

Teachers and students involved in Diplomas were given every possible advantage over those taking other qualifications – high-performance table points; £45 million in teacher training; £1000 to schools and colleges for each Diploma student; and special funding for transportation (WhitehallPAGES 2007). While criticised in the academic literature (Hodgson and Spours 2007; Smithers and Robinson 2008; Stanton 2008), in the few schools and colleges that delivered the Diplomas the overall sense of these qualifications was positive. However, tellingly, in a 2011 review many managers stated that they would no longer offer the Diploma because of the high failure rate amongst students and the qualifications' complex structure and assessment regime (McCrone et al. 2011). Teachers expressed their general satisfaction, although they, too, were concerned about the programme's complexity and assessment regime (Golden et al. 2011; Lynch et al. 2010; McCrone et al. 2011).

According to government commissioned reviews of the first two years of the Diploma (Golden et al. 2011; Lynch et al. 2010; McCrone et al. 2011), a majority of students were satisfied with their courses, although many thought that the Diploma would be more practical and hands-on than it turned out to be, stating that there were not enough active learning opportunities and that there was too much writing and coursework. Students thought that Diploma courses were different from their other courses, and appreciated the independent learning that was part of the model. Their mixed feelings (quoted below) complement the student perspectives reported in the CReST review.

It is so much better, so much better ... with the Diploma they [the teachers] tell you how to do it, then they tell you to get on with it and you find your own way round it.

We can have a laugh while we're doing the work. We can talk through it as well. In other subjects it's just 'copy out of the book'. (Golden et al. 2011, 70–71)

It's just paperwork, writing stuff, assignments...when you think you're going to get a break, they load you with another assignment. Every assignment is written.

We picked this course as a practical course ... but it's turned out to be more academic. The course isn't what they told us it would be. (Golden et al. 2011, 97–98)

As indicated from the student data presented by the CReSt team within this special issue, many students appreciate hands-on activities. But in one example, they are speaking of 'trail bikes, cooking, sports, bricklaying, plumbing, music, art, gardening' (Feiler this edition, 150) not writing long assignments about business planning. The Diplomas tended toward academic drift – valuing the academic and applied over the hands-on, skills-based vocational and practical learning that students seemed to expect (Hodgson and Spours 2007). Some of the students who took part in the government-sponsored interviews were concerned about the amount of academic work the Diploma involved and that the work was too challenging (Golden et al. 2011).

Although the Diplomas would probably have faded out on their own accord, since their take up never came close to expectation, the Coalition never supported them and in 2011 the awarding bodies that offered them pulled the plug. But some of the observations that Diploma students made about their learning can be brought to bear for all sorts of different subjects; an observation that the students whose perspectives are contained within this volume would surely agree:

*It's the way it's taught. The teachers put us in charge. It helps people to work as a team. If every subject were taught in the same way, students would be much happier about coming to school.* (Golden et al. 2011, 97)

While neither the academic literature, nor Wolf's analysis, indicates that students at key stage 4 make 'substantial improvement in their general attainment as a result of taking more vocational courses' and there is evidence that students drop out of vocational provision at the same rate as those who leave academic provision (Wolf 2011, 181), there could be good reasons to listen to students when they ask for a variety of lesson types. To my mind the problem is the underlying assumption, shared across the political spectrum, that up to 50% of children have a 'style of learning' that is simply not compatible with the academic learning. Consequently – in the conventional wisdom – such students need to be taking vocational qualifications. Could we not attempt to listen to students and make learning across all subjects more interesting and exciting for all? The students whose voices we hear in this issue understand the value of education – academic as well as vocational – but feel disenfranchised with regard to being able to affect curriculum and qualifications development. Of course, they are not alone in that disenfranchisement. As recently as February 2013 in the face of overwhelmingly negative responses from teachers, lecturers, and senior leaders in schools, colleges, universities, subject associations and employer groups to some of the current government's national curriculum, GCSE and A level proposals, the Coalition government has decided to press on regardless. It is not just students' voices that are not heard.

## Note

- I am using the term vocationally related, rather than vocational or occupational, because most of these qualifications introduce learners to a general work-related area and do not equip them with employment competence.

## Notes on contributor

Tina Isaacs is a senior lecturer at the Institute of Education. She is Programme Director for the MA in Educational Assessment and co-Director of the Centre for Post-14 Research and Innovation. Prior to joining the Institute Tina worked at the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ), the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) in qualifications development, implementation, accreditation and monitoring.

## References

- Boston, Ken. 2005. *Letter to the Honourable Ruth Kelly*. 14 July 2005. QCA. [www.qca.gov.uk/correspondence](http://www.qca.gov.uk/correspondence).
- Golden, S., T. McCrone, P. Wade, G. Featherstone, C. Southcott, and K. Evans. 2011. *National Evaluation of Diplomas: Cohort 1 – The Second Year*. DfE Research Report DFE-RR125. London: DfE. <http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/IID07/>.
- Highman, J., and D. Yeomans. 2011. “Thirty Years of 14-19 Education and Training in England: Reflections on Policy, Curriculum and Organisation.” *London Review of Education* 9 (2): 217–230.
- Hodgson, A., and K. Spours. 2007. “Specialised Diplomas: Transforming the 14-19 Landscape in England?” *Journal of Education Policy* 22 (6): 657–673.
- Hodgson, A., and K. Spours. 2011. “Educating 14- to 19 Year Olds in England: A UK Lens on Possible Futures.” *London Review of Education* 9 (2): 259–270.
- Isaacs, T. 2013a. “The Diploma Qualification in England: An Avoidable Failure?” *Journal of Vocational Education and Training* 65 (2): 277–290.
- Isaacs, T. 2013b. “What Does Good Upper Secondary Education for the Tail – and Maybe Everyone – Look Like?” In *The Tail*, edited by Paul Marshall, 111–124. London: Profile Books.
- Lynch, S., T. McCrone, P. Wade, G. Featherstone, K. Evans, S. Golden, and G. Haynes. 2010. *National Evaluation of Diplomas: The First Year of Delivery*. London: DCSF. [https://www.nfer.ac.uk/nfer/publications/IID02/IID02\\_home.cfm?publicationID=425&title=National%20evaluation%20of%20Diplomas%20the%20first%20year%20of%20delivery](https://www.nfer.ac.uk/nfer/publications/IID02/IID02_home.cfm?publicationID=425&title=National%20evaluation%20of%20Diplomas%20the%20first%20year%20of%20delivery).
- McCrone, T., P. Wade, G. Featherstone, C. Southcott, S. Golden, and G. Hayes. 2011. *National Evaluation of Diplomas: Cohort 2 – The First Year of Delivery*. DfE Research Report DFE-RR126. London: DfE. <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DFE-RR126.pdf>.
- QCA. 2002. *Including all Approved Qualifications in School and College Performance Measures – Phase One Report*. London: QCA.
- Raffe, David, and Ken Spours. 2007. “Three Models of Policy Learning and Policy-Making in 14-19 Education.” In *Policy Making and Policy Learning in 14-19 Education*, edited by D. Raffe and K. Spours, 1–32. London: University of London.
- Shepherd, Jessica. 2009. “Teenagers Reject Diplomas.” *The Guardian*, September 2, Education section.
- Smithers, Alan, and Pamela Robinson. 2008. *The Diploma: A Disaster Waiting to Happen?* Buckingham: Carmichael Press.
- Stanton, Geoffrey. 2008. *Learning Matters: Making the 14-19 Reforms Work for Learners*. Reading, MA: CBF.
- WhitehallPAGES. 2007. *(DCSF) Diplomas Pass Another Key Milestone on Road to Delivering the New Ground Breaking Qualifications*. WhitehallPAGES. [www.whitehallpages.net](http://www.whitehallpages.net).
- Wolf, Alison. 2011. *Review of Vocational Education – The Wolf Report*. <http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DFE-00031-2011>.