

## **Pupil voice – learners and the Diploma**

### **Focus group outcomes**

As part of Strand 1 of QCA's Building the Evidence Base project, CUREE has carried out a series of three focus groups with Year 9 students to establish their views on the Diploma qualification which will be introduced in September 2008.

This report summarises the outcomes of the focus groups which were held in two schools in a West Midlands consortium and one school in a London consortium. A series of activities were designed to elicit student comments on a set of questions agreed between QCA and CUREE. These can be found in the appendix. The report presents a brief description of the students participating in the focus groups and their schools, and then draws on the data to answer the questions set by QCA.

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## **Participants**

School 1 – Humanities specialist college, approx 1,350 students on role, approx 25% FSM

11 students:

6 taking the Diploma, 5 taking GCSEs  
6 female, 5 male  
2 white, 8 Asian, 1 black

School 2 – Roman Catholic technology college, approx 1,000 students on roll, below average FSM.

15 students:

8 taking the Diploma, 7 taking GCSEs  
9 females, 6 male  
15 white

School 3 – Church of England performing arts college, approx 1,000 students on roll

12 students:

6 taking the Diploma, 6 taking GCSEs  
7 female, 5 male  
8 white, 4 Asian

## **Which diploma have students chosen and why?**

As the Diploma is in its pilot phase, in all three schools only one line was available currently. In each case this was creative arts and media. Students' reasons for choosing the diploma fell into three general areas. These were because they:

- had a particular career path in mind to which the diploma was relevant
- were not sure of their career path, but preferred the Diploma to GCSEs
- wanted to try the diploma at KS4 to see how it went

### *Diploma relevant to future career*

Some students had a very clear idea of their future career and saw how the Diploma was a direct route to this. The students' intended careers

included graphic design, fashion design, computer game design, acting, film production, drama therapy, professional dancer. Several of these students were clear that they would continue with the Diploma at level 3 as a route to university. They also expressed the view that the Diploma provided them with a real life context for their learning.

Some students who did not necessarily envisage a career directly in creative arts and media, nevertheless saw the Diploma at KS4 as a viable stepping stone to future options. One student, for example, had decided he would do A levels including a foreign language after level 2 Diploma. Another student saw the Diploma at KS4 as a route to taking ICT in the sixth form. Yet another student wanted to become a forensic scientist and intended to take A level sciences after the level 2 Diploma.

On the whole those who had opted for the Diploma appeared to have a more concrete idea of what their future career plans were, than those who opted for the GCSE route.

#### *Preference for Diploma over GCSEs*

Several students had chosen the Diploma because they enjoyed art or were considered to be good at it by their teacher. Others had taken the Diploma as an alternative to the less attractive GCSE route. In the case of one school, taking the GCSE option meant that French at KS4 was compulsory. At least two students cited this as a reason for opting for the Diploma.

#### *Trying out the Diploma*

On the whole students who had chosen the Diploma were relaxed about the fact that it kept their options open. Several said that they were trying out the Diploma at KS4 to see if they liked it before deciding to take it further in the sixth form or at college. Many felt that going on to A levels after the Diploma was a viable option.

Other reasons students gave were that:

- the Diploma would be more “lively” than taking GCSEs and would provide access to more subjects
- “it involves our interests”
- it is “new and exciting”

During the course options activity (see appendix), students also suggested that in order to do the diploma you needed to be committed and enthusiastic. They saw the Diploma route as offering an opportunity for academically able students to pursue their interest, and to engage if they were having problems at school. They also assigned a student to the Diploma as it aligned with her life circumstances (looking after younger siblings).

### **Why did those students who are not taking the diploma decide not to do so?**

Fewer students who had opted for an all GCSE route had decided on their future career than those taking the Diploma - 11 of the 20 Diploma students compared with 7 of the 18 GCSE students. Future careers which GCSE only students did mention were midwifery and physiotherapy. It appeared from the discussions that taking all GCSEs was the 'default' route, that is to say students had taken a decision not to opt for the Diploma, rather than having clear reasons for opting into GCSEs. In the blankety blank activity (see appendix) students stated they were taking GCSEs because:

- "we wanted to do Geography"
- "we don't want to have a career involving diploma subjects"

One student felt that the Diploma was not going to last and would fail. Some students also stated that it had not been their choice to take all GCSEs. Unfortunately because of the restricted time the students were with us there was not the opportunity to follow this comment up.

### **What kind of support and guidance had students received for making their choices?**

Students in all three schools had attended some form of workshop where they were introduced to the content and structure of the diploma. In one consortium this consisted of a visit to the local college to look at its creative arts and media facilities.

In addition, the schools had held information evenings for students to attend with their parents. In one consortium a representative from the local college was also present to describe the Diploma to parents and students.

In at least one school students had spoken with their teacher on a one-to-one basis about the KS4 options, and here students felt that their teacher had been the biggest influence on their decision to take the Diploma.

In two of the three schools it does not seem that careers advisors (as opposed to teachers) have played a role in helping Year 9 decide which option to take.

## **Had the guidance and support helped?**

On the whole students appeared to be well informed about the Diploma, and had made decisions based on the guidance they had received. In the poster activity (see appendix) Diploma students made the following comments:

- “It will allow you to work with new people and equipment”
- “New experiences and challenges”
- “The course is recognised by top universities”
- “You can explore a better approach to learning and gain important skills for adulthood”
- “It is worth up to seven GCSEs”
- “Gets you thinking outside the box / outside the classrooms”
- “Days out of school”

Diploma students also mentioned the emphasis their teacher had placed on the diploma as a good route for entering university, and that this had helped them make the decision. Those Diploma students who spoke about university entrance were confident that the Diploma would be looked upon favourably by universities.

The poster activity also revealed that some GCSE students were also well informed about the diploma:

- “If you like to be creative then this is a fantastic opportunity. Diploma route involves art, drama and many more. This is your only chance to put your ideas to paper. You still do the core subjects. Maths, science, English, RE and ICT.”

Some GCSE-only students were also clear that they had to pass functional skills tests in order to gain the Diploma. In discussion one student who had opted not to take the Diploma had done so because he had realised the implication of failing the modules relating to literacy and numeracy would be not gaining the qualification.

For the majority of Diploma students the workshops had had a big influence on their decision to take the Diploma. One student who had visited the local college spoke of the amazing resources they had, including specialist IT hardware. The talk given by the college representative during the information evening had also had a very persuasive impact on students and parents.

### **What else would students have liked to know when they were making their decision?**

The poster activity was an opportunity for students to reveal what they knew about Diplomas. As a follow up we asked the students what else they would like to know about the Diplomas. The questions they still had were:

- what sort of grades they would receive and what they would mean
- how many GCSEs the Diploma was equivalent to
- how they would describe the Diploma to future employers
- whether taking the Diploma would involve going to other schools to work with students there
- what the status of the coursework would be / whether they would have to take exams at all
- how many different lessons they would have.

While the questions above do not necessarily mean the students hadn't received the information, they do reveal where there are still areas of haziness for at least some of them. In addition, a comment on one poster revealed a misconception about the Diploma: "No exams involved – only coursework."

### **What other factors have influenced their decision?**

In the diamond 9 activity (see appendix) we asked the students to rank those people who had had most influence on their decision to opt for the Diploma / GCSEs.

Parents and teachers featured prominently - both were within the top four for all groups. This was followed by sibling and friend as people most likely to influence students' decisions. Celebrity, television and adverts generally received a lower ranking. When students did mention celebrities as an influence, they spoke about people they admired because they had achieved something, such as famous rap artists and formula one drivers.

Parents emerged as an important influence in open discussion too. Parents' opinions of Diplomas and GCSEs appeared to have had an influence on the choices their children made. At least two students taking the Diploma mentioned that their parents thought the Diploma was a good option. Those GCSE students who spoke about their parents' influence felt that they did not have any great objections to the Diploma, but that they believed the GCSE/academic route to be better. At least one student felt that his parents were ambivalent about what options he took at school.

While friends were ranked quite highly as an influence in the diamond 9 activity, students did not appear to be overly pressured to take the same options as their

friends. A group of three students mentioned some of their friends who had not thought the Diplomas were a good option, but these students were philosophical about not being in the same classes as their friends at KS4. They felt that it was unlikely they would be working together when they were older.

Students taking the Diploma were also attracted by the idea of breaking out of classroom based activity, as revealed in the poster activity. One Diploma student was looking forward to working on projects as part of a group.

Curriculum design by the schools themselves appears to have had some influence on the decisions students have made. In two schools the introduction of Diplomas has meant greater prescription of GCSE options (compulsory French in one school, and increased science classes in another). Several Diploma students in both schools mentioned this as a contributory factor in taking the option to do the Diploma.

### **Are centres targeting the Diploma at specific groups of learners and if so, which ones?<sup>1</sup>**

The need for students to pass the functional skills elements of the Diplomas is influencing the decisions subject leaders are making on who should take this option. Teachers in two schools said that this was a consideration. One of them regretted the fact that the need for students to pass end of course tests in functional modules may make it difficult to target highly creative but less academically skilled students. He felt this could jeopardise the Diploma as a positive alternative to some students who are more interested in the applications of creative subjects rather than art and design itself

At least one school has limited the number of Diploma places to 15 while it is in the early stages of implementation.

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<sup>1</sup> Data corresponding to this questions emerged in discussion with teachers in two of the schools after the focus groups had finished.

## Appendix

### Activities used during the focus groups to elicit student comments

#### Activity 1 - Diamond 9 - Influences

Students were asked to discuss who had had an influence on their decision to take the Diploma/GCSEs, and place the cards in rank order on a diamond 9 grid. The cards which the students had in front of them were:

<b>Parent</b>	<b>Brother/Sister</b>	<b>Teacher</b>
<b>Careers Advisor</b>	<b>Friend</b>	<b>Television</b>
<b>Advert</b>	<b>Celebrity</b>	

#### Activity 2 – Blankety Blank

In this activity the GCSE students formed one group, and the Diploma students formed another. Each group was given three cards with the sentence stem:

“We have chosen to do the Diploma because ... “ (Diploma students)  
or

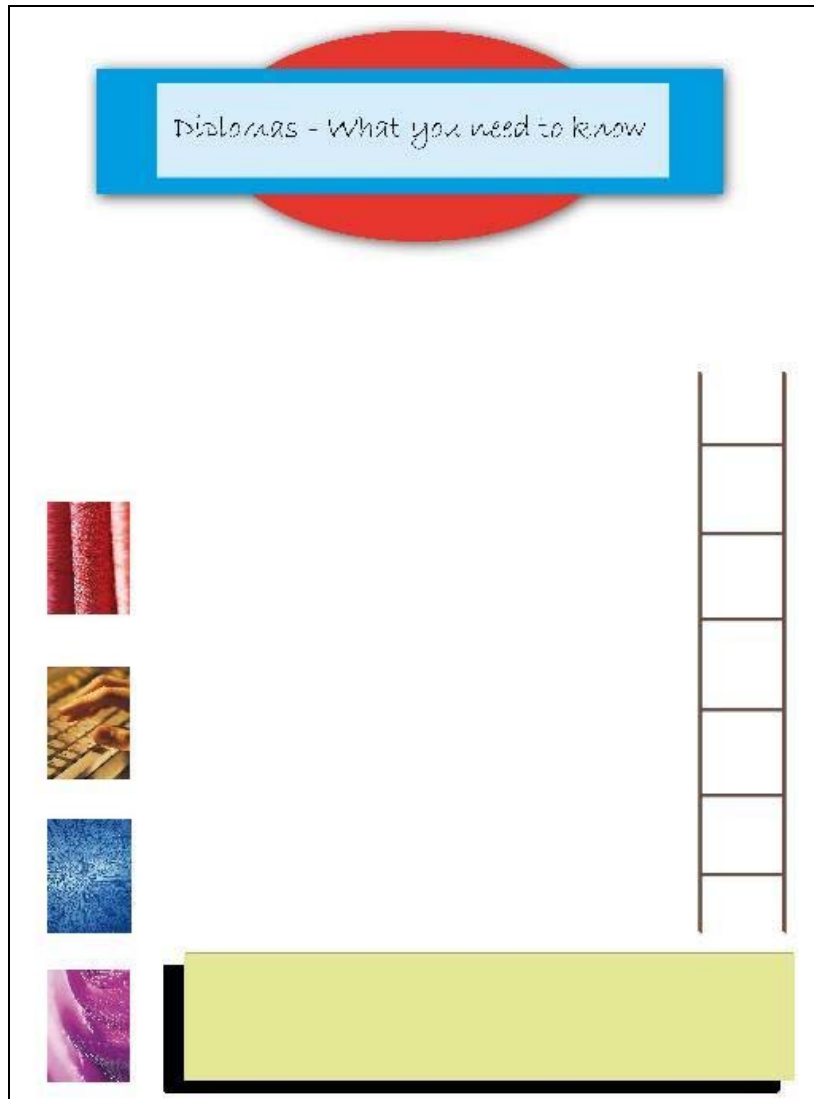
“They have chosen to do the Diploma because ...” (GCSE students)

In their groups the students completed the sentence three times with their top three answers. They then compared their answers, and for each one that matched, in this case the GCSE students gained a point. The game was then repeated with the groups giving reasons for selecting the GCSE-only option.



### Activity 3 – Creating a poster for Year 8s

In this activity the students worked in their GCSE or Diploma group to produce a poster which would inform Year 8 about the Diploma option in Year 9.



### Activity 4 – Course options

In this activity participants were given an outline description of three students. In groups of 3-4 they were asked to decide whether they would recommend for each student whether to take GCSEs only or the Diploma, and if so which one. The descriptions were:

**Kuldeep**

- in the middle of his year in most subjects
- most teachers think he is a good student, and always gets a glowing report in sport
- likes music - in school choir - and wants to form own band
- not keen on science
- there's a lot of pressure in his family for Kuldeep to go to university



## Hannah



- doesn't like school much, and has missed quite a few days this year
- spends a lot of time looking after her younger sister and step-brother
- used to enjoy drama
- thinks she might do hairdressing for something to do





Chris



- loves motorbikes and spends a lot of time with dad doing them up
- mum and dad don't talk much about what Chris wants to do later
- best in his year in French, and among top five in other subjects except D&T
- gets into trouble at school quite a bit, and has nearly been suspended



The participants were given the following Diploma options.

<p><i>Society, Health and Development</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ could lead to work such as nursing or teaching</li> </ul>	<p><i>Engineering</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ could lead to work such as upgrading railways or installing heating systems</li> </ul>
<p><i>Construction and the Built Environment</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ could lead to work such as designing and constructing buildings</li> </ul>	<p><i>Information Technology</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ could lead to work such as designing and delivering software packages</li> </ul>
<p><i>Creative Media</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ could lead to work such as designing and producing clothes or acting</li> </ul>	<p><i>Hair and Beauty</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ could lead to work such as beauty therapy or hairdressing</li> </ul>
<p><i>Hospitality and Catering</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ could lead to work such as running a hotel or a preparing food in a restaurant</li> </ul>	<p><i>Sport and Leisure</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ could lead to work such as managing a cinema or working in a sports club</li> </ul>