

Universities and the 14–19 Reforms

Deian Hopkin, Vice Chancellor and Chief Executive of London South Bank University, outlines how universities are responding to the 14–19 reforms

One of the most important consequences of the recent turbulence in the financial world and the consequent collapse of confidence in the economy, has been a sharper recognition of the crucial role of education, at all levels, in the process of recovery. Even before the crisis which began in September 2007 and gradually engulfed the world, it was acknowledged that educational reform was needed in the UK. Our participation and achievement rates have seriously lagged behind those of our competitors and are seriously at odds with the UK's aspiration to remain prominent in the world economy.

The current interest in the skills level of the UK population, graphically outlined in the final report of the Leitch Review of Skills in 2005, goes back many years. Indeed, over forty five years ago, the National Inquiry into Higher Education, chaired by Lord Robbins, recommended that universities should provide 'instruction in skills suitable to play a part in the general division of labour'. The Dearing Report, ten years ago, talked about "key skills" and work experience as essential elements in developing the employability of graduates. Over the years, moreover, there have been several attempts to provide better routes to employment among graduates ranging from the Enterprise in Higher Education programmes to the skills elements in the Subject Benchmark statements of the Quality Assurance Agency.

More recently, however, the 2004 Tomlinson report on the 14–19 curriculum had pointed to serious deficiencies in the present provision and made recommendations for a radical review.

Although the full Tomlinson plan was not adopted, significant developments have now taken place including the revision of A level, the introduction of functional skills at GCSE and, above all, the launch of the Diploma with its seventeen lines of learning, rolled out gradually over the next three years. In addition to this, however, the national programme of apprenticeships has been accelerated and, most recently, it has been proposed to extend the school leaving year to 18 by 2015.

All of these changes are vitally important for universities and colleges. For one thing, we are all aware of the demographic changes which are beginning to take shape and which means there will be significantly fewer 18-year olds in the UK by 2020. The precise impact of this is not yet fully understood, since educational participation rates are closely linked to socio-economic factors; thus, it does not necessarily follow that enrolment in universities will decline since there is some evidence of a surge in middle-class birth rates. Nonetheless, it seems obvious to most higher education leaders that school participation rates must be improved to compensate for this demographic decline.

More importantly, universities and employers alike have often commented on the deficiency in certain key skills amongst young people and the educational reforms are designed to meet these shortcomings.

The 14–19 reforms seek to address both these issues by emphasizing the importance of key functional skills, introducing "stretch and challenge" for the ablest young people, but providing a much wider range of provision to attract those who are currently opting out of education altogether. The Diploma in particular strikes in a new direction. The Tomlinson report lamented the unnecessary dichotomy between "academic" and "vocational" curricula and proposed, instead, an alignment between knowledge and competences or skills. The Diploma does precisely this. Designed by a partnerships of employers, professionals and academics, they offer a more comprehensive and flexible framework in which specific sectoral knowledge and skills, such as the creative media, engineering, construction or retail, can be aligned with key functional skills such as literacy, numeracy and the management of information.

Universities are naturally cautious about new educational developments, of which there have been more than a few over the past three decades. However, it is striking how positively universities have reacted to the new curriculum changes, not least the Diploma. Despite a good deal of often ill-informed criticism of the new lines of learning, virtually every university in the country have declared their willingness to consider the Diploma, alongside more traditional courses, as an entry qualification and this includes every selective university. Indeed, Cambridge university's Director of Undergraduate Admissions publically declared that the Diploma in Engineering, including bespoke mathematics modules, was probably a better preparation for general engineering degrees at his University than A level. Oxford and Imperial have also declared their willingness to take the Diploma seriously. This is important because many parents and teachers, rightly or wrongly, take their cue on education from such universities.

Last September the first cohort of some 12,000 students of embarked on the Diploma supported by consortia of schools and colleges. These include universities, more than 70 of which are directly involved in this provision, and more will become involved as new lines of learning are introduced between now and 2011. Indeed, universities are centrally involved in preparing new Additional and Specialist Learning for the Diploma and this will reinforce the level of acceptability of the new qualification.

Even before the present economic crisis, it was evident that something needed to be done to enhance the skills of our nation and nowhere is this more necessary than at the earliest stage of education. Now that we face even more uncertain times, with the prospect of a highly volatile economy in the future, the need to equip our young people with the widest range of skills and most appropriate knowledge, is paramount. Universities understand this only too well, which is why they are so keen to see the new educational reforms succeed.