

National Evaluation of Diplomas

Findings from the 2008 Survey of Higher Education Institutions on their Implementation and Impact

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Executive summary

The survey

The survey provides a 'baseline' of attitudes toward Diplomas in late 2008 among a stratified, purposive sample of 19 English higher education institutions (HEIs), educating 17 per cent of the country's undergraduates. Respondents were primarily key senior managers (Pro Vice-Chancellors and Heads of Admissions) in each institution. Data from these responses was supplemented with that of a sample of 62 admissions tutors spread across 17 of the 19 institutions. The findings are considered to be representative of the English higher education sector as a whole. It should be noted that the timing of this survey meant that its focus was on the first five Diploma lines of learning relevant to entry into higher education in 2010.

Key findings

- Higher education institutions (HEIs) of all types in our survey welcome the breadth of learning inherent in Diplomas and their potential to widen participation. All those in the sample regard the range of learning styles fostered by Diplomas to be well aligned with developments already in hand to refine and develop undergraduate learning.
- All of our sample institutions feel sufficiently prepared at this stage to engage fairly and consistently with applicants from the first Diploma cohort seeking entry to HE in 2010. All HEIs had completed an initial assessment of which Diplomas, among the first five lines of learning, appear suitable and relevant as preparation for entry to the undergraduate courses that they offer. As a result, the HEIs expect to post specific entry requirements (including Additional and Specialist Learning components) on their websites during 2009.
- All institutions in our sample wish only to recruit students (including, from 2010, those holding Diplomas) whom they believe will succeed and thrive on undergraduate courses. HE senior managers in all types of institutions are according applicants holding Diplomas at Level 3 the same status as A level students. A large majority anticipate specifying Additional and/or Specialist Learning, most commonly in the form of attainment in an A level subject. Four of the 19 have been involved in development of Diploma specifications (all in Engineering); involvement in local curriculum development or delivery of Diploma has not been a high priority.
- On some matters, institutions in our sample differ in their outlook. The 'research-intensive' institutions are more likely to examine closely the academic rigour of Diploma content and less likely to assume that Diploma study will turn out to have been adequate preparation for HE entry. However, this cautious approach appeared to be based on perceptions that Diplomas might be lacking in subject depth rather than detailed knowledge of the specific content of the first five lines of learning. In 'teaching-led' institutions, by contrast, a higher level of internal support for Diplomas is reported among departmental tutors and these HEIs are more likely to assume Diploma applicants will be recruited in 2010, across lines of learning.
- The HEIs surveyed expect to recruit a small number of Diploma-holders in 2010, given the low volume of candidates embarking at Level 3 in September 2008. This is seen as unproblematic in the first year and affording an opportunity to consider the initial cohort of applicants on a case-by-case basis.

HE context

Most of the HEIs in the sample are seeking to become more selective in undergraduate intake (according to their respective 'missions'). All have similar aims for student recruitment - an incremental broadening of the social composition of undergraduates with no significant growth in volume in the short to medium term. Across all institutions, review and innovation in teaching and learning is high on the management agenda. This process is strikingly common across HEIs and emphasises themes highly resonant with the formal aims of Diplomas, for example: promotion of enquiry-based learning and life/employability skills; increased e-learning and a broadening of learning styles and experience; emphasis on sustainability/sustainable development throughout the curriculum; continued attention to student support.

Potential impact of Diplomas on HEIs

Awareness of Diplomas among HEI managers is widespread but awareness raising internally among the broader academic staff is uneven.

Managers at all of the institutions sampled have undergone a process of identifying which Diplomas in 2010 would, *in principle*, be relevant/suitable for entry to their undergraduate courses. In most institutions, most lines of learning have been deemed so. However, reflecting the more cautious stance of admissions tutors, managers in six of the sampled HEIs queried whether, *in practice*, Diploma study will turn out to have been adequate preparation. In the remainder of cases (mostly 'teaching-led' institutions), recruitment of Diploma applicants in 2010, across lines of learning, was already assumed.

Admissions policies in relation to Diplomas

With the exception of one, a 'research-intensive' university, senior managers in all institutions indicated that they expected to follow the UCAS tariff in regarding an Advanced Diploma as equivalent in 'size' and 'status' to 3.5 A levels. In addition, most managers and admissions tutors saw the nature of the Diploma qualification as both a specialised pathway into undergraduate study and as suitable for a wider range of courses.

At the same time, senior managers and admissions tutors in all but two of the 19 institutions anticipated specifying Additional and/or Specialist Learning (ASL), normally in the form of an A level. Related to this, institutions would be publishing during 2009 specific requirements for entry onto their undergraduate courses in 2010 by Diploma-holding entrants.

Meanwhile, the Extended Project is widely welcomed, both as a new qualification and as an element of Diploma design. Most admissions tutors across all types of institution (perhaps somewhat conservatively at this stage) identified a written dissertation as the most appropriate form of project for those learners aiming at undergraduate study.

Diplomas, progression arrangements / accords and Foundation degrees

With the exception of the Russell Group members surveyed (where it is thought that recruitment is more likely to arise from the area in which the HEI is located), HEI managers do not expect Diploma-based entry in 2010 to differ from the current geographical pattern of their undergraduate recruitment - despite the burgeoning of local partnerships between schools/colleges and universities in recent years (particularly as part of the 'widening participation' agenda).

Furthermore, managers in most of the HEIs expect Diploma-holding applicants to progress straight onto their conventional undergraduate degrees; only two expect that the Foundation degrees they offer will be the preferred entry route.

Recruitment projections for Diploma applicants in 2010

It is anticipated that the number of successful applicants with Diplomas in 2010 at each institution will be small, (perhaps an average of approximately ten each), due to the lower-than-expected volume of candidates embarking at Level 3 in September 2008. This was seen as unproblematic given that: learners embarking on Diplomas in September 2008 may not have received the advice concerning the Additional and Specialist Learning for HE entry that their successors will be given; and small numbers in 2010 would enable institutions to consider applicants on a case-by-case basis.

As is the case with any qualification serving as preparation for undergraduate study, HEIs indicated that they will be keen to recruit among available candidates those who can demonstrate that they are committed, enthusiastic and appear likely to succeed as undergraduates. Admissions teams are wary, in particular, of recruiting students who, once admitted, may drop out.

Across the sample of admissions tutors surveyed, IT was the line of Diploma learning where recruitment was considered most likely, while Construction and the Built Environment was considered the least likely.

Involvement with the development and delivery of Diplomas

Levels of involvement with the development and delivery of Diplomas were low among managers and admissions tutors in the institutions surveyed. Four institutions out of the 19 had been involved in the development of Diploma specifications; a further four were currently involved in delivery. Most HEIs did not see involvement in delivery as part of their role.

Overall attitude toward Diplomas at this stage

Compared to some aspects of Diplomas explored with HEI staff, the **overall** attitudes toward Diplomas among both senior managers and admissions tutors were more readily distinguishable between those in 'research-intensive' universities and those in 'teaching-led' institutions.

The 'research-intensive' universities are more likely to examine closely the academic rigour of Diploma content; linked to this, comparatively lower levels of support for Diplomas among academic staff at this early stage were also noted in these universities. By contrast, in 'teaching-led' institutions it was reported that there was generally strong internal support for Diplomas.

There were common responses from institutions of all types to other themes in the data: support for the breadth of learning inherent in Diplomas, their potential to widen participation and the Extended Project component; the view that success would depend on student quality and preparedness for undergraduate study; concerns that Diplomas may widen disparity between types of HEI; and generally positive views concerning the official information about Diplomas that respondents had received.

Policy implications

- Diploma design is well aligned with developments in undergraduate teaching and learning across all kinds of HE institution. Those Diploma lines which develop a clear identity and reputation have the potential to:
 - strengthen this connection by assisting HEIs in their goal of increasing selectiveness, according to their specific 'mission' and portfolio of courses; and
 - find their niche within the wide array of undergraduate provision on offer in England.
- While senior managers within HEIs reported receiving a considerable amount of information in relation to Diplomas in general, it might be useful for more detailed information to be developed relating to the particular lines of learning, targeted specifically at departmental admissions tutors.
- HEIs of all kinds are well-informed about Diplomas and largely sympathetic to them. However, delivery in schools and colleges, of the full richness of learning implicit in Diploma design, to able young people with the enthusiasm and level of commitment required to succeed as undergraduates, will be essential if strong progression to higher education, including the leading 'research-intensive' universities, is to be secured. This is especially important in the early years, when the numbers of Diploma-holding applicants are small.
- Once the specific requirements for undergraduate course admissions in 2011 are published (during 2009), it will be crucial that school and college staff responsible for advising young people in year 11 about post-16 choices are fully informed of these and communicate them speedily and effectively to students and their parents.
- With small numbers of Diploma-holders seeking HE entry in 2010, it is likely that most or all will have their complete profile reviewed by admissions teams (and, possibly, be interviewed). This *may* mitigate the problem of these learners, in 2008, having chosen Additional and Specialist Learning (ASL) in the absence of published HE entry requirements.
- Diploma reputation should be strengthened by the clear finding that HE senior managers in all types of institution are according applicants holding Diplomas at Level 3 the same status as A level students. Thus while there may be less of a 'pull-through' of Diploma-holders into local higher education than some have envisaged, our interviewees did not regard such 'widening participation' applicants as somehow better suited to Foundation degree provision or requiring 'special consideration' within the framework of progression agreements with local partners.
- It is not necessary for all HEIs to be involved in Diploma development. It is, however, important that those which are involved in influencing Diploma Development Partnerships do so in ways recognised and approved in their academic peer / disciplinary community, to enhance the status of the Diploma as an appropriate pathway into higher education in general.
- Two related and central themes emerged at a number of different points during the course of research:

- (i) There is broad and strong support across all types of HEI in England for essential design aspects of Diplomas and their potential to bring new types of student and styles of learning into higher education.
- (ii) The first three years of Diplomas at Level 3 will be important in determining the image and reputation of this new qualification. As such, HEIs will be monitoring evidence relating to: the calibre (and, to an extent, the volume) of students guided onto these Level 3 programmes; their ability during the course of study to show commitment to their chosen sphere of knowledge; and the effectiveness with which they have been taught in schools and colleges prior to seeking progression to undergraduate study.

1. Introduction and higher education context

1.1 Background to the survey within the overall evaluation

In March 2007, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) announced that a new Diploma qualification would be available from September 2008 for young people aged 14-19. A total of 146 consortia of schools, colleges and other partners (sometimes including higher education institutions) were approved through the 'Gateway 1' application process to begin delivering Diploma courses from September.

In January 2008, the DCSF commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) and the University of Exeter to conduct the national evaluation of the implementation and impact of Diplomas over the period 2008-2013. This report presents the findings of the first of five projected surveys of higher education institutions (HEIs) within the overall evaluation of Diplomas. In the context of these surveys, HEIs were questioned mainly in their role as 'end users' of Diplomas, rather than as possible deliverers of aspects of the Diploma curriculum (although questions about their involvement in Diploma delivery were posed). It should also be noted that the timing of this survey, in late 2008, meant that its focus was on the first five lines of learning relevant for entry into higher education in 2010.

1.2 Aims, design and research methods

The main aim of this first survey (undertaken from October to December 2008) was to establish a 'baseline' across English higher education concerning awareness of and attitudes toward Diplomas, almost two years before the first Diploma-holding applicants are able to enrol as undergraduates through the first five lines of learning (autumn 2010).

A purposive sample was chosen for the survey. This comprised those HEIs currently offering degree programmes in subjects broadly aligned to most or all of the first five Diplomas. The sample was then stratified to provide representativeness of the full range of institutions typical of higher education in England. Nineteen of the 122 English HEIs (16 per cent) were selected for inclusion in the survey. All of those institutions approached to take part agreed to do so (for further sample details, see section 1.3).

The Pro Vice-Chancellor for Teaching & Learning (PVC) and Head of Admissions (HoA) at each institution took part in a separate telephone interview.¹ These senior managers then identified within their institutions a sample of relevant admissions tutors to whom an online questionnaire was sent. This resulted in 62 completed questionnaires being returned from across 17 of the 19 HEIs in the sample. These 62 tutors between them were responsible for admissions to 147 separate, named courses. The data reported in the following pages mainly derives from the telephone interviews with senior managers and is supplemented by data from the admissions tutor questionnaire survey. In particular, admissions tutor data has been included where it illustrates, elucidates or amplifies points made by our senior manager interviewees.

¹ Due to illness and internal reorganisations, only one respondent, rather than two, was available for interview in three of the 19 institutions. Overall, 35 interviews with senior managers were undertaken across the 19 institutions, including 18 PVCs and 17 HoAs.

1.3 The representativeness of the HEI sample

The stratified sample of 19 HEIs comprised those in membership with one of the five 'mission groups' that currently characterise UK higher education, along with representation of those institutions which remain 'unaligned'. The spread of the 19 institutions across the various groups chosen mirrors the relative sizes of the groups, as follows:

- three of the 20 Russell Group member institutions
- three of the 18 1994 Group member institutions
- four of the 24 Million + member institutions
- four of the 19 University Alliance member institutions
- three of the 21 Guild HE member institutions
- two unaligned institutions.

As such, the findings are representative of the views of around one fifth of HEIs across all types of institutions in the sector.

In 2006-07 the 19 sample institutions combined had a 17 per cent share of the 1,495,000 undergraduates attending English HEIs (HESA 06/07: table 0A). The sample included a wide range of HEIs, including those:

- with highly selective courses recruiting nationally/internationally, through to institutions predominantly committed to widening participation with a strong local/regional mission
- exhibiting a broad range of performance in various 'quality' indicators, for example, research performance, formal undergraduate entry requirements and record of graduate employability (each of these being indicators that are broadly correlated).

Furthermore, the 19 HEIs in the sample were spread evenly through the published institution-level rankings of the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise and *The Times Good University Guide 2008*. Within these rankings, the institutions surveyed included those positioned in the top and bottom deciles of overall performance, as well as in seven of the remaining eight deciles.

Within the sample, six of the 19 HEIs could be characterised as broadly high-performing and 'research-intensive' in character (educating 31 per cent of the undergraduates across the sample institutions). Of the remainder, three were mid-ranked (of varying size in terms of undergraduate numbers) and the other ten were mainly medium- to large-sized institutions, ranked in the bottom half of league tables. (For a fuller description of the various 'mission groups' and related terminology used in sections 1.2 and 1.3, see the Glossary of Terms on p. 48.)

1.4 The HEI context

In our interviews with Pro Vice-Chancellors and Heads of Admissions we asked a range of contextual questions, under three broad headings, which we considered relevant to the consideration by these HEIs of Diploma-holding applicants from 2010.

Patterns and sustainability of undergraduate student recruitment

There was a range of undergraduate student cultures represented in our sample, illustrative of the diversity of English higher education. Evidence for ways in which this variety influences patterns of access of Diploma-holders from 2010 will be the subject of later surveys within the overall evaluation.

- **Size.** The three Guild HE institutions were small providers (06/07 undergraduate population within the range 750–5,000), while two of the University Alliance HEIs had enrolled between them around 20 per cent of the students across the sample (06/07 undergraduate population within the broad range 20,000-30,000).
- **Social background.** In the three Russell Group institutions the lowest proportion of entrants from independent schools was approximately 17-18 per cent and a 1994 Group HEI commented that, as it climbed the published rankings, it was increasingly attractive to private school students/families. A majority of the sample reported a significantly smaller proportion of their students as having been privately educated (although one post-1992 university wished specifically to attract this group); in one case up to 80 per cent of entrants were 'non-traditional'. In describing their student population, very few interviewees highlighted the ethnicity of their students.
- **Geographical origin.** Within the sample, this ranged from one HEI where 35 per cent of undergraduate entrants were overseas students (most educated to age 18 in the UK) to another where 76 per cent of entrants were from the region served by the university.
- **Age profile.** Whereas in the 'research-intensive' institutions a large majority of entrants were aged 18–20, other HEIs in the sample reported proportions of entrants over the age of 25 at more than 65 per cent and those over 30 at more than 30 per cent. At one of these the average age of undergraduate enrolment was 29.
- **Prior qualifications.** All of the 'research-intensive' HEIs reported that a large majority of their undergraduates came straight from school with A levels (in the range 79-94 per cent), although the International Baccalaureate (IB) is becoming more common. In these HEIs a very small number of entrants were 'Access' students (two-four per cent) or those with qualifications such as BTEC (approximately one per cent).

Interviewees were asked about the sustainability of their current pattern of recruitment, particularly in view of the impending demographic downturn of 18 year olds (from 2010, at which point Diploma applicants will become available to them). All institutions had reviewed the evidence and tried to anticipate the effects:

- Of the six 'research-intensive' universities, one was concerned about this. Otherwise, the view was that the effect had been overemphasised and, in any case, it was the newer and larger 'teaching-led' institutions that would be likely to experience the greatest difficulties.
- Elsewhere, views ranged from those uncertain but concerned that there might be mildly negative consequences, to those anticipating a quite challenging downturn in recruitment.

Recruitment goals, 2009-2013

In the different contexts in which this sample of HEIs work (including very varied formal undergraduate entry requirements), there were many similarities in recruitment goals being pursued by senior managers at the time of the survey. Overall, these developments suggest that, in common with other applicants, Diploma-holders from 2010 will find entry to leading universities to be strongly competitive (although coming from a 'widening participation' background is helpful). Meanwhile, although access elsewhere may be less reliant on high prior attainment, a majority of HEIs aim to become more selective (in accordance with their different 'missions') through concentration on areas of strength and/or niche provision (niches which may become clearly linked to Diploma progression).

In the **immediate future**, the majority of HEIs reported expecting and desiring only slight adjustments to their current undergraduate profile in terms of volume and social / geographical composition. Where changes were anticipated, these included: a drive to internationalise the intake (Russell Group); and a desire to broaden social composition and increase entry grades (1994 Group).

Over the **next five years** the recruitment aims reported were more differentiated. Among the 'research-intensives', commonly reported aims included: maintaining or slightly shrinking current 'home / EU' undergraduate student numbers and effecting small adjustments to the social, ethnic and international composition of undergraduates; evolving strategies for widening participation (including more Black and Minority Ethnic students) while increasing the level of prior attainment among the intake; making courses more selective; and introducing additional admissions tests (one Russell Group HEI). Elsewhere, there was a similar desire to broaden the composition of undergraduates, maintain numbers and, in some HEIs, increase the quality of the intake (in terms of UCAS points). Some sought to strengthen local links, others to become less reliant on the locality, and most wished to increase the proportion of their courses which 'select' students (rather than 'recruit' them). Two HEIs specifically mentioned actively attracting Diploma students as a significant recruitment goal from 2010.

Undergraduate teaching and learning: current priorities

Overall, significant management activity in this area was reported across the sample institutions, with senior teams at the time of the survey actively reviewing key aims relating to the teaching and learning of their undergraduates. Among 'research-intensive' HEIs, the interviews suggested that, with the Research Assessment Exercise recently completed, management attention was reverting to learning and teaching and to the 'student experience'.

Some generic themes in the responses emerged strongly across many respondents in the sample and were strikingly resonant with the formal aims of Diplomas. These included efforts to:

- promote enquiry-based learning and life / employability skills
- increase e-learning
- broaden student learning styles and the experience of students more generally
- emphasise sustainability/sustainable development throughout the curriculum
- devote continued attention to student support.

2. Potential impact of Diplomas on HEIs

Key findings and implications for policy

- Institutions of all kinds reported similar trends in relation to their methods for raising awareness internally about Diplomas, which included workshops and e-bulletins. All HEIs had undergone a process of identifying which Diplomas in 2010 would, in principle, be relevant / suitable for entry to their undergraduate courses.
- There were generally positive views concerning the official information received by senior managers about Diplomas, although half of those surveyed found the amount of information somewhat overwhelming.
- Across the sample of 19 institutions as a whole, there was a high level of perceived match between four of the first five lines of learning and courses currently on offer in these institutions, with respondents deeming these relevant / suitable, *in principle*, as preparation for undergraduate study. However, managers in six of the HEIs sampled expressed caution as to whether, *in practice*, Diploma study would turn out to have been adequate preparation. In the remainder of cases (mostly 'teaching-led' institutions), recruitment of Diploma-holding applicants in 2010, across lines of learning, was already assumed.
- Across all types of institution, Diploma design was seen as aligned with, and building on, recent development in undergraduate learning styles.

Implications for policy

HEIs of all kinds are well informed about Diplomas and largely sympathetic to them. However, delivery in schools and colleges, of the full richness of learning implicit in Diploma design, to able young people with the enthusiasm and level of commitment required to succeed as undergraduates, will be essential if strong progression to higher education, including the leading 'research-intensive' universities, is to be secured.

While it was evident that senior managers within HEIs have received a considerable amount of information in relation to Diplomas in general, it might be useful for information to be developed relating to the particular lines of learning, targeted at departmental admissions tutors.

2.1 Diploma awareness

At the time of our interviews in October and November 2008 across the 19 institutions, HoAs and all but one of the PVCs surveyed considered that they were abreast of Diploma development and that preparation for potential student enrolments from 2010 was sufficiently in hand. By way of contrast, only five (eight per cent of the sample) of departmental admissions tutors surveyed felt very well informed about Diplomas at present, while 24 (39 per cent) felt either poorly informed or not informed about them at all, a pattern of response similar across all types of institution.

Sources of information / understanding among PVCs were very varied and included: involvement in roadshows; participation in Diploma development; and understanding generated through school / college governorships, media coverage, Academy sponsorship and local partnership agreements / activities (see section 4). PVCs were also clear where the key expertise in their institution needed to be located, as the following comments indicate:

I know as much as I need to know - without knowing the detail of the unit specifications.

We are knowledgeable. Our admissions team is on top of Diplomas.

As a senior team, I feel we are pretty clued up. I am semi-clued up. The real depth in expertise needs to reside on our team of admissions specialists.

Senior managers in all HEIs regarded their central admissions staff as the focal point of internal expertise, advice and information concerning Diplomas. In all institutions, these specialist staff had run, or were about to run, workshops and briefings for departmental admissions tutors and most provided tutors with regular e-bulletins on admission issues in which Diplomas had featured.

Managers considered that awareness at departmental level was mixed, as the comments below illustrate:

[Awareness] will be very mixed - from next to nothing to quite well informed.

Not all academics are clued up about Diplomas and probably some never will be. It's important that the people who need to know do know when the time comes.

Those with good reason to see Diplomas as assisting in their recruitment of undergraduates were the most well informed at this stage. Elsewhere, within each institution there was, as expressed in one typical response '*not much internal market pressure for departments to look at Diplomas closely*'.

Overall, senior managers felt that most individual tutors in the academic departments were not yet familiar with the programmes of study and nine of the 19 HEIs commented specifically that aspects of Diploma design appeared complicated and somewhat difficult to comprehend. Our survey of departmental admissions tutors was able to test these general impressions. Among the 62 respondents to the tutor questionnaire, 47 (76 per cent) stated that they had received information about Diplomas, with staff in 'selecting', research-based universities being (perhaps surprisingly) more likely to have this information than their colleagues in 'recruiting', 'teaching-led' institutions. In a majority of cases the source of information was the central admissions team within the HEI concerned, but a minority of departmental admissions tutors had derived their information from among a wide range of printed materials or at meetings external to the university. Most prominent of these disparate sources were the websites of the DCSF and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) (each accessed by 13 per cent of the tutor sample). Although over three quarters of

departmental admissions tutors reported receiving information on Diplomas, there was evidence that, in terms of the curricula of the lines of learning, the information provided to them in a majority of cases was not sufficiently detailed.

The marketing and promotion of Diplomas

When asked how effective official information about Diplomas had been to date, HoAs were more likely to report that information had been good or average than PVCs, as Table 1 indicates.

Table 1 - Senior Managers' views on the information received about Diplomas

	<i>Pro Vice-Chancellors</i>	<i>Heads of Admissions</i>
Good	5	10
OK / average	7	6
Poor / not helpful	2	1
Don't know / haven't seen any	4	0
N =	18	17

Source: NFER / Exeter evaluation of Diplomas: Interviews with senior managers in HEIs, October / November 2008

Specific aspects where senior managers felt more or better information would have been helpful included: greater clarity in the early stages of implementation; more coherent and less piecemeal information; earlier publication of unit specifications to give a better flavour of the courses that would be offered; and improved web-based information.

Departmental admissions tutors were also asked this question. The main response across this group as a whole was to ask an array of specific questions seeking further information as to how Diplomas were likely to work in practice, both in terms of the learning undertaken and the place of Diplomas alongside other programmes and courses as preparation for HE. Commonly, respondents in all types of HEI wanted to know more about the curriculum of Diplomas, with a smaller group raising detailed questions about the equivalence of Diplomas to other qualifications.

Underlying the observations of Diploma marketing expressed by senior manager interviewees in nine of the 19 HEIs was a feeling that communication had not been well coordinated, leading to a sense that it had been *'thrown at'* HEIs, creating a *'wall of noise'*, *'part of the snowstorm of everything else'*. This could potentially constrain the effectiveness of the communications about Diplomas.

2.2 Relevance of Diploma design and curricula

With the exception of two interviewees (from 'research-intensive' HEIs) who felt it was too early to say, senior managers considered that, in principle, the design of Diplomas was welcome and had the potential to fit well with developments in undergraduate education. The following Russell Group responses were typical of the wider sample:

Potentially there is a good match to our evolving undergraduate teaching and learning cultures. A point of similarity is an emphasis on breadth.

The Diploma could be almost the perfect preparation for the [institution-named] graduate. We like the potential for independent learning, project skills, the focus on inter-disciplinarity ... and applied subject matter, and the experience of placement. This is the way we want to go.

However, PVCs at seven of the 19 HEIs commented that, while Diplomas had potential, everything would depend on how well the courses were taught and the precise knowledge, understanding and skills that they fostered in young people, as the following comments illustrate:

It will be crucial that it is the very talented teachers who are those leading Diplomas in school and colleges.

I have had experience of responding to curriculum innovation - for example, with the introduction of the International Baccalaureate. I was sceptical until looking closely at what the IB programme involved. At that point it started to appear very attractive on paper... After that, it depended on the skill with which centres taught the IB. It will be the same with Diplomas.

From their vantage point as senior managers, interviewees were next asked about the **relevance and suitability** to their undergraduate courses of Diplomas in the first five lines of learning. The detailed breakdown is shown in Table 2.

Table 2 - Relevance and suitability of Diplomas to undergraduate courses in sampled HEIs

	Diploma relevance / suitability		
	Yes	No	Unsure
Engineering	15	2	2
Society, Health and Development	14	2	3
Creative and Media	13	1	5
IT	13	3	3
Construction and the Built Environment	8	7	4
N = 19*			

Source: NFER / Exeter evaluation of Diplomas: Interviews with senior managers in HEIs, October / November 2008

*Includes 18 PVCs and one HoA in the remaining institution

As this table indicates, there was a high level of perceived match, *in principle*, between four of the first five lines of learning and courses currently on offer in the 19 institutions sampled, although it must be stressed that this does not imply that in all cases HEIs necessarily thought they would enrol many learners from these lines. In this context, all interviewees said that, with low numbers of Diploma applicants expected in 2010, they would be likely to look at each on a case-by-case basis in the first year. Where responses were negative or unsure about the relevance of Diplomas as preparation for undergraduate entry, 'research-intensive' institutions said that they would, nevertheless, be scrutinising carefully what young people had done and, in particular, considering how effective mathematics preparation had been in the IT Diploma (for those seeking entry to the more mathematical kind of undergraduate course in Computer Science / IT) and the Engineering Diploma.

Managers in all of the HEIs surveyed took the view that, on educational grounds and at face value, all Diploma lines were equally valid, although one respondent thought that intensive involvement of professional bodies (such as had occurred in Engineering) would serve to strengthen the credibility of specific lines. More generally, the following response from the PVC at a 'research-intensive' university was positive, but not uncharacteristic. All of the first five Diploma lines, he considered,

Will have the type of qualities that we want in undergraduate students: flexible and able to integrate knowledge better across different strands, which doesn't happen at A level at all ... They could look really attractive. I would like to see how these students do and track how they adapt. They may make the transition better than other more traditional A level students into undergraduate study.

Our admissions tutor questionnaire also asked about the appropriateness of Diplomas as preparation for undergraduate study. Thirty-two tutors (52 per cent) across all types of institution agreed with the statement that Diploma students who achieve good grades in the Principal Learning Units of their chosen Diploma would find this ‘a sound basis for succeeding as an undergraduate’, while six (ten per cent) thought not with 23 (37 per cent), as yet, undecided.²

2.3 Diploma and undergraduate learning styles: is there a match?

Learning styles and forms of progression

When relating Diploma learning to undergraduate developments already underway in their institution (see section 2.2), senior managers at all HEIs felt that, in principle, Diploma applicants should be able to progress smoothly to undergraduate study.

Managers at six HEIs (three ‘research-intensive’ and three ‘teaching-led’) reiterated the point that it was too early to say whether, in practice, such smooth progression would occur. The new qualifications were not yet ‘*tried and tested*’ and it was the quality of teaching, along with the nature of the student groups that had opted for Diploma and the guidance they had received when choosing their level 3 courses, which would determine success or failure in relation to HE entry.

- Typical responses from interviewees in ‘research-intensive’, ‘selecting’ institutions included:

It will all depend on the quality of the teaching and the learning that comes through. High quality in the first two or three years will be crucial to confidence in Diplomas.

In principle the match is good.

There could be some challenges there but these days there are challenges even for students with A levels.

- Typical responses from interviewees in ‘teaching-led’, ‘recruiting’ institutions included:

The Diploma curriculum should provide a closer match to our courses than does the A level.

A lot depends on how effective the schools offering Diplomas are in selling it. It was conceived as an alternative to A levels so all students would have taken them. But A levels were saved. So will Diplomas be seen as a soft option for weaker students or will they be seen as a fully viable and comparable option for the more able? If weaker students take it, they may struggle with undergraduate study.

I think Diploma applicants should be well adapted and have a good range of skills. The question should be how well does our university adapt its provision to suit them! I strongly object to those institutions who think they need to repair deficits in students to make them match its way of doing things. That’s not the game we’re in. The question is how adaptable can we be.

² One respondent did not answer this question.

A similarly mixed set of points was made by admissions tutors responding to the questionnaire. Fourteen (23 per cent, all except one from 'selecting' institutions) commented, unprompted, that they felt Diploma learning was, in principle, well suited as a preliminary to undergraduate study. On the other hand, 13 (21 per cent, from a mix of 'recruiting' and 'selecting' institutions) stated that certain A level grades (or, in one case, specific pre-study in social work; in another successful performance in a Selection Workshop; and, in a third, submission of a suitable portfolio of work) would be an entry requirement to their courses as part of Diploma applicants' Additional and Specialist Learning (ASL), so as to act as guarantors of continuity and progression (see also section 3.3).

Meanwhile, several tutors responsible for admissions to science-related degree programmes commented that, while they had already decided on the mix of ASL they would require of applicants, they did not expect many candidates to have followed this precise path - at least until the Science Diploma itself is in operation from 2011. In another case, a tutor in a Russell Group university was waiting for the arrival of the Languages Diploma (also in 2011) '*which we believe will better prepare candidates for study in our department than the current A levels*', due to its richer mix of learning styles .

The potential influence of Diplomas on undergraduate learning styles

The learning styles integral to Diploma design were seen by senior managers broadly as a good match with developments in undergraduate teaching and learning. All of these interviewees felt that Diploma influence would currently be of low visibility within their institutions (in that initial numbers were likely to be small), but potentially positive. Three responses (the first from a Russell Group institution) illustrate aspects of this latter point:

Diploma styles of learning could be influential - in so far as positive experience with the first applicants will tend to reinforce our interest in breadth of study prior to 18, where this does not compromise depth.

We will think very carefully about how we can build on the skills they're bringing and that may bring about changes to teaching and learning on our undergraduate programmes.

I believe the receiving institution has to adapt its induction to the people coming in.

Thus, although the specific context and interpretation varies, it would appear that Diploma design is seen as aligning well with, and having the potential to influence, existing trends in undergraduate learning.

3. Admissions policies in relation to Diplomas

Key findings and implications for policy

- Senior managers in all institutions except one (a 'research-intensive' university), indicated that they expected to follow the UCAS tariff in regarding an Advanced Diploma as equivalent in 'size' and 'status' to 3.5 A levels.
- Most managers and admissions tutors saw the nature of the Diploma qualification as both a specialised pathway into undergraduate study and as suitable for a wider range of courses, for example, social sciences, humanities, law.
- Senior managers and admissions tutors in all but two of the 19 institutions anticipated specifying Additional and / or Specialist Learning (ASL), normally in the form of an A level.
- During 2009, institutions would be publishing specific requirements for entry in 2010 onto their undergraduate courses by Diploma-holding entrants.
- The Extended Project was widely welcomed as a new qualification and as an element of Diploma design. Most admissions tutors across all types of institution (perhaps somewhat conservatively at this stage) identified a written dissertation as the most appropriate form of project when preparing for undergraduate study.

Implications for policy

Once the specific requirements for undergraduate course admissions in 2011 are published (during 2009), it will be crucial that school and college staff responsible for advising young people in Year 11 about post-16 choices are fully informed of these and communicate them speedily and effectively to students and their parents.

With small numbers of Diploma-holders seeking HE entry in 2010, it is likely that most or all will have their complete profile reviewed by admissions teams (and, possibly, be interviewed). This *may* mitigate the problem of these learners, in 2008, having had to choose Additional and Specialist Learning (ASL) in the absence of published HE entry requirements.

3.1 Equivalence and status

Senior managers in 18 of the 19 institutions surveyed reported that they would follow the tariff set down by UCAS in according the Advanced Diploma the **same size and status as 3.5 A levels**. Included in this were two (Russell Group) universities that, formerly, had tended only to specify A level grades in entry requirements; these two institutions would now be using the tariff in relation to the Diplomas, not least because it aided clarification of the size of different awards. Another institution reported proposing to change its current standard offer, made on the basis of 3 A levels, to 3.5 A levels to better reflect the size of awards such as the Advanced Diploma. Only one (Russell Group) institution had made the decision to 'disregard the UCAS equivalence'; Diploma applicants would be required to achieve a specific grade in the Diploma plus the same grade in two A levels.

The survey responses of admissions tutors were broadly aligned to those of senior managers, with 57 per cent of those in 'research-intensive' universities reporting that the tariff attached by UCAS to the Diplomas was fairly/very important, compared to 77 per cent of those in the 'teaching-led' institutions. Forty-six per cent said they would accord the Diploma the same status as A levels, with no significant difference evident between the 'research-intensive' and the 'teaching-led' institutions on this question. However, admissions tutors in 'teaching-led' universities were slightly more likely (69 per cent compared to 57 per cent) to accept the Diploma as equivalent to 3.5 A levels.

3.2 Generic or specialised?

Both PVCs and HoAs were asked whether they considered the Diploma to be a generic or specialised qualification. The Diploma qualification was perceived, in general, as providing young people not only with a specialised pathway into related areas of undergraduate study, but also as having the potential to be suitable for entry into some different subject areas, particularly the social sciences, humanities and law, where currently a range of A level subjects is accepted. Specific responses of this kind included the following:

It wouldn't be fair to exclude people, but they would have to have sufficient specialist knowledge to succeed. Of course there's also the difference between 'recruiting' and 'selecting' courses ...

At the moment, Law applicants don't have Law A level. Perhaps the Business Diploma with English A level as ASL might be fine.

In the main we see Diplomas as a generic qualification, acting as a 'bridge across' to a range of courses.

Only two institutions emphasised what they saw as the strongly specialised nature of the Diploma qualification, encapsulated in the following comments:

We are in the process of identifying Diploma pathways from lines of learning into named degree courses. Our assumption is that this is the most obvious form of progression that we will experience... We feel that our marketing and publicity material should emphasise likely progression pathways.

I suppose it's the fact that they've got different pathways with particular titles and the [Diploma] course is therefore geared towards specific areas which makes it more specialist. I see it as a bit like a BTEC - related to a particular line of study.

Admissions tutors were also asked to indicate whether they viewed the Diploma as a specialist and/or generic qualification. Their responses largely mirrored those of their senior managers, with tutors from 'research-intensive', high-ranking universities being slightly:

- less likely than those in 'teaching-led' institutions to believe the Diploma could be deployed as a generic qualification (29 per cent compared to 44 per cent)
- more likely to see Diplomas as a specialised qualification leading to directly related undergraduate programmes (50 per cent compared to 46 per cent).

Across the sample of admissions tutors, 11 (18 per cent) ticked both the *generic* and *specialist* boxes - the response seeming to imply that some Diploma lines are seen to be more specialist than others (although patterns in the data on this point were inconclusive) - while 27 per cent ticked the 'don't know' box, suggesting some uncertainty in university departments as to the nature of the Diploma at the time the survey was undertaken.

More broadly, responses from the senior managers indicated that those 'recruiting' institutions operating in a highly competitive and shrinking market, due to the demographic downturn in 2010, appeared slightly more likely than 'selecting' universities to accept any line of learning as currency for entry onto undergraduate programmes. Meanwhile, these 'selecting' universities were more likely to specify the Additional and/or Specialised Learning to be undertaken as prerequisites for entry onto their undergraduate programmes.

Although there was general acceptance that the Diploma could provide entry to a range of courses, the expectation was that the majority of young people who had chosen to study a Diploma at Level 3 would be likely to wish to continue along that sector-related pathway in their higher education studies. This was considered to be particularly likely for students taking the Diplomas identified by respondents as those most closely aligned to a particular occupational sector: Engineering; Construction and the Built Environment; and to a slightly lesser extent, Society, Health and Development.

3.3 Additional and/or Specialist Learning (ASL)

Although the **equivalence** of the Advanced Diploma to 3.5 A levels was almost universally accepted, many senior managers in institutions emphasised that the **content** of the Diploma would be scrutinised to ensure a match to the undergraduate course for which applicants had applied. In most cases, 'content' meant the subject knowledge covered, though some interviewees referred to the type of skills Diploma learners would acquire. The majority of the institutions were, at the time of the interviews, in discussion with academic staff / admissions tutors in departments to determine appropriate specific combinations of ASL in preparation for a survey being undertaken by UCAS in late 2008. Some had only just begun the in-house consultation process and were unable to provide details of ASL; others had clearly been grappling with this matter for some time and were able to give more information.

Seventeen of the 19 institutions surveyed indicated that some or all of their departments would include specifications for ASL in the entry requirements for their programmes. The remaining two said that they might do so but that no final decision had yet been made. The ASL required by institutions will be made explicit, at a programme level, in the entry requirements published in prospectuses. In most cases, senior managers said the ASL specified would be an A level qualification, but some institutions reported that they would also consider elements from other types of qualifications, such as BTEC National Diploma units.

Specialist Learning (SL)

For undergraduate courses which are seen to offer a direct pathway from a Diploma subject area, a majority of the senior managers surveyed indicated that their institutions would specify **SL in the form of an A level**. For example, one considered that undergraduate courses in nursing would probably require an A level in Human Biology alongside the Society, Health and Development Diploma. This would be in line with its current requirement for A level candidates. In another institution, it was likely that a Creative & Media Diploma-holding applicant would be required to have English A level for entry onto an English degree. Universities offering Engineering degrees were examining carefully the mathematics element of the Engineering Diploma to ensure, as one interviewee put it, that the content *'gives those people an equal opportunity at the point of starting their programme of undergraduate study'*. There was a strong indication that mathematics A level will be a specified pre-requisite for many Engineering-related degree programmes, although the comment below demonstrates a positive view of the maths content of the Engineering Diploma:

...some have said that the maths in the Engineering Diploma will be better and perhaps more appropriate than A level maths. We're reassured that there's been quite a lot of input by Engineering academics ... and professional bodies... into the development of that Diploma.

Nevertheless, this interviewee's institution intended to require Maths A level as Specialist Learning.

In institutions where undergraduate courses included specifications set down by professional bodies, interviewees expected that tutors would carefully scrutinise each applicant's academic profile to ensure sufficient relevant subject content. In addition, the young person's application would be reviewed more widely so as to assess their level of commitment to that particular vocation, as the following comment illustrates:

[We] would look at wider issues in relation to suitability - in relation to teaching, nursing. It's not about erecting some academic hurdle; it's about matching professional body expectations. And in nursing and teaching, there's this expectation that they've done some voluntary work and so on. So the student needs to show commitment to that line of work.

However, this interviewee was keen to stress that such considerations are currently the case with A level applicants and Diploma applicants would thus be treated no differently.

Additional Learning (AL)

Where undergraduate programmes currently specify a particular A level as a pre-requisite for entry, senior managers considered it likely that if an applicant's Diploma is in a different area to the undergraduate course being applied for, an **A level relevant to the course** will be required alongside the Diploma as Additional Learning. The following comment was typical in this respect:

At the moment, the History degree would require History A level, so if a Diploma student wanted to come onto our History degree, they'd have to have History A level as the Additional Learning.

This interviewee went on to explain that admissions tutors would also look at the general academic profile of the applicant to assess its relevance to the undergraduate programme for which the applicant had applied:

We'd also look at the Diploma subject. The Creative & Media Diploma with History [A level] may be fine - fairly logical and balanced. It seems less likely that Engineering and History would be OK.

There was no evidence that Diploma-holding students would be disadvantaged by this requirement of AL for entry onto some undergraduate programmes. It is common practice, particularly for 'selecting' institutions, to specify a combination of study for A levels as required preparation for admission to some/many of their undergraduate courses.

Fourteen admissions tutors had indicated that none of the first five lines of learning was relevant to their current programmes. This may be partly explained by the sampling strategy used in this survey. Heads of Admissions had been asked to select which departmental admissions tutors in their institution should receive the questionnaire. There was evidence that some had undertaken this task by carefully matching the first five lines of learning to specific relevant departments; others had viewed the Diploma as a potentially generic qualification and had sent the questionnaire also to departments not directly related to one of

the first lines of learning. In the majority of cases, the fourteen admissions tutors reporting no match to their current programmes were those in departments unrelated to the first five lines of learning.

Amongst the remaining 48 responses (except one who gave no data), 147 separate, named undergraduate courses were identified as broadly matched to one or more of the first five Diploma lines. Twenty-seven of these 47 tutors (57 per cent) said they would be likely to require ASL for entry onto their programme(s), while 20 (43 per cent) said they would not. Tutors in 'research-intensive' institutions were more likely to anticipate ASL being specified than those in 'teaching-led' universities (73 per cent compared to 53 per cent). Across the range of institutions and in almost every case, admissions tutors confirmed what their senior managers had said - the form of ASL required would be in terms of an A level. Similarly, most of the tutors' comments referred to the need to ensure students arrived at their institution with relevant subject knowledge. The comment below is typical:

In the case of students applying to study English Language with English and American Literature, an additional A level will be required in English Literature or English Language [in relation to Creative Media Diploma]

Only in two instances were other qualifications mentioned: BTEC and the International Baccalaureate (although it is unlikely that the latter could be accommodated within the Guided Learning Hours for the Advanced Diploma).

Extended Project (EP)

The questionnaire distributed to admissions tutors also sought views on the role of the Extended Project within the Diploma portfolio of learning elements. In order to help tutors to make an informed judgement, they were provided with a URL link to the web pages of EP specifications as currently set out by the main Awarding Bodies. The questionnaire set out a series of statements with which tutors were invited to agree/disagree. Table 3 sets out their responses to those statements, the patterns of which were broadly similar across all types of institution.

Table 3 - Departmental admissions tutors' views on the Extended Project

	Strongly agree %	Agree %	Disagree %	Strongly disagree %	Don't Know %	Missing %
The EP will provide a sound foundation in the type of study skills required for undergraduate study	8	53	5	2	31	2
The grade achieved in the EP will give an indication of an ability in the skills required for undergraduate study (e.g. independent learning, creativity and research skills)	10	50	2	3	34	2
It will be a useful tool to use when differentiating between students of similar overall ability	10	45	6	0	35	3
We will specify the grade to be achieved in this element of the Diploma when making an offer to an applicant	5	21	15	3	53	3
The EP is a component which enhances the educational value of Diplomas	15	52	5	0	26	3
N = 62						

*Source: NFER / Exeter evaluation of Diplomas: Questionnaire survey of 62 HEI departmental admissions tutors, November / December 2008
Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100*

Approximately one third of all respondents felt unable to agree or disagree with four of the statements and over a half indicated they did not yet know whether they would be specifying a grade to be achieved in the EP when making offers. However, 67 per cent of tutors in the sample believed that the EP enhances the educational value of Diplomas, while only five per cent felt that it does not. Respondents in 'selecting', 'research-intensive' universities were more likely to envisage specifying a grade as part of the offer process for applicants and to view the EP as having the potential to lead to selection among applicants of similar overall ability.

Awarding bodies have not been prescriptive about the nature of the EP. Indeed, it has been suggested that the project may take one of a series of forms including a written dissertation, a performance, a presentation, a film, a magazine or an artefact. However, a majority of admissions tutors, from across the range of higher education institutions, identified a **written dissertation** as the most appropriate preparation for undergraduate study, as the two comments given below illustrate:

A written dissertation will prepare students for researching and referencing projects.

Probably a written dissertation, as so much of our assessment is based on extended writing.

However, in considering these views, it is worth noting that, although assessment in HEIs has evolved and diversified in recent years from the traditional academic essay and formal examination, to include presentations, posters, portfolios, artefacts, film, and so on, there remains a reliance on traditional methods of assessment in some subject areas.

Consequently, it is possible that some of the tutors in this survey could not imagine what a different type of EP might look like and how this could be useful for undergraduate study. There were several tutors, though, who were willing and, indeed, enthusiastic to embrace alternative forms, as their responses demonstrate:

a performance involving project management, where students take the initiative in planning and executing different aspects of a performance.

[Creative and Media Diploma]

a portfolio of design work, logbooks of design process, design model (computer-aided or physical) [Construction and the Built Environment Diploma]

students on a social work degree usually have to complete portfolios of evidence in terms of their practice learning. Preparation for this would be useful.

[Society, Health and Development Diploma]

a development project that addresses all items of Project Management, System Life-Cycle, Analysis, Design Development and Testing. [IT Diploma]

3.4 Making information available to prospective applicants

Senior managers at four institutions reported discussions/consultations with other institutions/organisations (three with local partner schools/colleges; one at conferences) prior to drawing up their admissions policy in relation to Diplomas and drafting their prospectus entry. At the time of the survey interviews (October and November 2008) no institution had agreed the final wording for their prospectus with any outside institution/organisation.

The printed versions of university **prospectuses** take many months to prepare. Prospectuses for undergraduate entry in 2010 were to be finalised in most institutions during the first few months of 2009. Most of these printed prospectuses will carry little more than a statement 'welcoming' Diplomas; in two instances, interviewees reported that there was no reference at all to Diplomas in the forthcoming edition of their prospectus. **Websites**, however, provide universities with the opportunity to make information and guidance much more readily accessible to potential applicants and to update advice regularly. Once the Additional and Specialist Learning pre-requisites have been agreed by departments within universities, these will be added to the website sections describing entry requirements, as illustrated in the following comments:

There will be a general statement about the acceptability of Level 3 awards such as Diplomas. We are hoping to state some desired combinations for the prospectus that goes to press in January 2009.

The 2010 [printed] prospectus will not be specific because we don't know enough to give details... but [we will] have a table for all these new qualifications (including the Diploma) which we will update on the website regularly. As advice for applicants becomes more specific, [we] will update the prospectus online.

Only a small number of institutions seemed to be particularly well prepared at the time of the survey:

The 2010 prospectus is just being finalised - due out in January [2009]. It's going to say we welcome applications from people with the Advanced Diploma. On each subject page, we will identify which Diploma we will accept for a particular course. And it will also have the UCAS tariff points required and if a specific A level is required. There might be a grade attached to the specific A level.

In principle, the lateness in the publication of specific entry requirements for Diploma-holding applicants could prove a barrier to access to higher education for some learners commencing the Advanced Diploma in September 2008 and hoping to enter higher education in 2010, if they do not have the ASL required by an institution. In Spring 2008 when these young people were making decisions about their Level 3 choices, including which Diploma to take and what, if any, qualifications they should take alongside the Diploma as ASL, very little, if any, information was available to them from HEIs in relation to appropriate combinations of subjects or prerequisites.

However, in practice, as the number of Diploma-holding applicants applying for admission to undergraduate courses in the first year (2010) will be very small, it is likely that admissions departments/tutors will handle such applications in a similar way to those presented by BTEC and Access course candidates. In those instances, likely to be repeated in 2010 in relation to Diploma-holding applicants, admissions staff consider **the complete profile of the learner** and, in many cases, **interview** candidates prior to an offer being made.

Approaches from students / parents / schools / colleges

At the time of the survey, Heads of Admissions at eight of the 19 institutions reported receiving no enquiries from learners/parents, schools/colleges, so far as they knew, in relation to Diplomas. Where enquiries had been received, these were, in most cases: made to the institution's central admissions department/educational liaison office; few in number; and largely general in nature, such as seeking to determine, in broad terms, an institution's position on the acceptability of Diplomas. In all cases, enquirers had been reassured that, in principle, the Diploma qualification was an appropriate route onto undergraduate study.

4. Diplomas and progression arrangements / accords and Foundation degrees

Key findings and implications for policy

- Partnerships between schools/colleges and universities have increasingly become one of the features of the Outreach work of HEIs in recent years, particularly as part of the 'widening participation' agenda. However, with the exception of the Russell Group members surveyed (where it was thought there might be some increased 'localism'), HEI managers do not expect Diploma-based entry in 2010 to differ from the current geographical pattern of their undergraduate recruitment.
- Most managers in the HEI sample expect Diploma-holding applicants to progress straight onto conventional undergraduate degrees; only two expect that the Foundation degrees they offer will be the preferred entry route.

Implications for policy

Diploma reputation should be strengthened by the clear finding that HE senior managers in all types of institution are according applicants holding Diplomas at Level 3 the same status as A level students. Thus while there may be less of a 'pull-through' of Diploma-holders into local higher education than some have envisaged, our interviewees did not regard such 'widening participation' applicants as somehow better suited to Foundation degree provision or requiring 'special consideration' within the framework of progression agreements with local partners.

4.1 Types of partnership

Our interviews with senior managers explored the extent to which a respondent's institution was engaged in an arrangement/accord with local schools and/or colleges, and the significance of such partnership working for policies concerning the entry of Diploma-holding applicants to undergraduate courses. Only three institutions said that they had no current activity in this area (none of these was a member of the Russell Group or 1994 Group).

The kind of partnerships reported by senior managers ranged from formal Compact-type agreements through to 'collaborative relations'. Six institutions explicitly mentioned Compact schemes; five referred to progression agreements / accords; three talked about partnerships. For the remainder, relations with schools / colleges were described in terms of their general 'widening participation' activities.

Whatever the type of 'partnership', **key features** were: to raise awareness of higher education in general, particularly amongst groups with no history of family engagement in the sector; to provide detailed information to learners about requirements for particular courses; and to advise on combinations of study at Level 3.

In some institutions, progression agreements had been set up at a programme level, encouraging young people to approach a particular department. This personal contact was considered important, as the following comment illustrates:

There's [an] individual angle ... which would enable any individual student to approach a department here. We like to think we're very clear about our entry requirements, but sometimes people don't have confidence about their sources of information, so they like to approach individual departments.

Where Compact schemes / progression accords existed, it was likely that applications from students currently in partner schools/colleges would be guaranteed consideration, even if their predicted grades were lower than the normal entry requirement. In some cases an interview was guaranteed; in others the students were guaranteed an offer.

Interviewees in only two institutions indicated that the offer made to an applicant from a partner institution might be lower than the normal entry requirement level, though some respondents reported that in their HEI some 'softening' by admissions tutors might occur once examination results were available. This was more likely to occur in 'recruiting' than in 'selecting' institutions, as a comment made by a senior manager of one of the 'teaching-led' institutions indicates:

We monitor the students' applications and don't reject applications unless they're checked with the Partner School team. We tend to make standard offers, because we're a recruiting institution and then say 'we'll see how they go' ... We have discretionary Clearing so we may admit, or may make a change of course offer, if the original offer grades are not achieved by the student.

Interviewees were not asked specifically about the volume of applications through such formal/informal partnership arrangements but, from the comments made, it appeared that, in most cases, only a small number of undergraduates are recruited through these routes.

4.2 Relevance of partnerships to Diploma-holding applicants

In October/November 2008, interviewees could only hypothesise about the relevance of local partnership arrangements to Diploma-holding students applying for undergraduate entry in 2010. As one put it: '*We don't have any feel yet for the spread of Diploma applicants*'. However, the majority of institutions believed that **Diploma recruitment would not differ significantly** in geography from their normal recruitment patterns. Where current undergraduate recruitment was mainly from a national pool, senior managers envisaged that Diploma applications would mirror this. Where institutions relied largely on local/regional recruitment, it was considered that this pattern would be replicated for Diplomas, as the following comments illustrate:

We expect Diploma students to be recruited nationally.

We expect recruitment of Diploma students to be mainly national, as is the case with our A level applicants ... though there may also potentially be a slight regional slant because you may get the types of students who want to stay locally.

Recruitment is both local and national at [name of institution]. Some courses have local/regional recruitment. But no one has yet reached the stage of forming a progression agreement for a Diploma. The bulk of applicants for Diplomas are envisaged as coming from the national rather than the local pool.

Only amongst the Russell Group institutions was recruitment of applicants with Diplomas seen as more likely to arise from the local area, and thus contrary to their normal recruitment patterns. These HEIs highlighted the role of their partnerships with local institutions in enhancing understanding of the Diploma qualification in their university, in providing schools/colleges with advice on combinations of study and, in one case, in helping to identify the type of Extended Project which might be valuable preparation for undergraduate study, as the comments below indicate:

We may be able to see the Diploma in action through the partnership and similar networks. Probably Diploma access to [this institution] will mainly be through local structures of this kind.

If we admit Diploma applicants, it may well be that it will be because teachers in our partner institutions have good knowledge of what we will require of applicants.

There is a potential for our Outreach team to work with local college and school providers in identifying kinds of Extended Projects that might be undertaken by Diploma students.

4.3 Foundation degrees

Fourteen of the 19 institutions reported some involvement with Foundation degrees. In general, this type of provision was more common in the post-1992 universities: no Russell Group institution in the sample currently provides Foundation degrees, and though two of the three 1994 Group members reported some provision, it was seen as 'very small business' for these institutions.

Senior managers explored the relevance of the Foundation degree route to Diploma-holding applicants. Such applicants are expected, in general, to be recruited straight onto conventional undergraduate programmes. However, it was felt that Foundation degrees could provide an alternative route into higher education for some learners who do not meet the entry requirements for first year (Level 1) undergraduate study. The comments below illustrate the different potential pathways:

Diploma applicants should be able to go straight onto conventional undergraduate courses.

I would anticipate that Diploma recruitment would map onto our normal undergraduate patterns. I don't see Foundation degrees as particularly important in establishing progression routes from Diplomas.

[Foundation degrees] are not massively important as establishing a progression route from Diplomas ... But for some people, I imagine it would be an ideal route - because it would be a more gradual introduction into undergraduate study, with the option of topping up at year 3 in the future.

Interviewees in only two institutions indicated that a Foundation degree might be the preferred pathway for Diploma learners. These institutions had identified a good match between Diploma lines of learning and their current Foundation degree provision. Indeed, one institution was hopeful that, if the Diploma qualification proved an incentive to participation post-16, it would result in an increase in enrolment to its Foundation degrees.

Institutions not currently involved in Foundation degree provision reported **Foundation year** provision in some subject areas. This was described by one institution as 'a second chance for those for whom A level grade predictions were unfulfilled' or who 'had inappropriate A levels' for their chosen course of study. It allowed institutions to 'top up' students' subject knowledge and skills in preparation for their undergraduate study. None of these institutions believed that Diploma learners as a group should require a Foundation year, but it was believed its availability could prove useful to some individuals.

The discussion with senior managers about progression agreements and Foundation degrees elicited the strong message that Diplomas are being accorded the **same status as A levels** and that, as a consequence, recruitment processes and patterns for Diploma-holding applicants are likely to be very similar to those for A level students.

5. Recruitment projections for Diploma applicants in 2010

Key findings and implications for policy

- The number of successful applicants with Diplomas in 2010 was anticipated at each institution to be small (perhaps an average of approximately ten each), due to the lower-than-expected volume of candidates embarking at Level 3 in September 2008.
- As is the case with any qualification serving as preparation for undergraduate study, HEIs indicated that they would be keen to recruit among available candidates those who can demonstrate that they are committed, enthusiastic and appear likely to succeed as undergraduates. Admissions team are wary, in particular, of recruiting students who, once admitted, may drop out.
- Across the sample of admissions tutors surveyed, IT was the line of Diploma learning where recruitment was considered most likely, while Construction and the Built Environment was considered the least likely.

Implications for policy

For the reputation of Level 3 Diplomas to be enhanced in the early years when numbers are small, HE staff are saying that schools and colleges need to recruit to Diplomas learners who have the ability, enthusiasm and level of commitment required to succeed as undergraduates.

5.1 Numbers anticipated in 2010

By October / November 2008, when the telephone interviews with senior managers in higher education institutions were undertaken, it had become clear that recruitment to the first five Diploma lines of learning was lower than anticipated at all levels, though a couple of interviewees seemed unaware of the actual numbers of learners who had chosen to take a Level 3 Diploma in 2008.

The majority of senior managers in our sample of higher education institutions were aware that approximately 1200 learners are currently studying the Diploma at Level 3. As a result, they had calculated that in 2010 it was likely that their institution would recruit **small numbers** of Diploma-holding applicants, that is, fewer than ten. Interviewees in two 'teaching-led' HEIs expected higher numbers (around 50). This estimate appeared to be based on their knowledge of the local Diploma recruitment patterns of Gateway 1 consortia and their expectation that partnership/progression agreements with local schools/colleges would provide a pathway onto their undergraduate courses.

The small numbers predicted for undergraduate entry in 2010 by our interviewees should be seen as their adjustment to the smaller-than-anticipated number of learners taking the Level 3 Diploma in its first year of operation. Senior managers at many of our sample HEIs anticipated that applicant numbers would increase as the number of young people taking the Level 3 Diploma increases over the coming years.

Tutors were asked about the likelihood of their department recruiting applicants with particular Diplomas. When positioned on a continuum of those lines most likely to result in the recruitment of Diploma-holders through to those least likely, the responses formed the following pattern:

- IT (most likely), through
- Engineering, Society, Health and Development and Creative and Media, to
- Construction and the Built Environment (least likely).

Within this pattern, responses did not appear to be influenced by the strength of competition for places, in terms either of competition for entry to particular courses (based on whether or not they had recruited through 'Clearing' in 2008) or to specific institutions (as revealed in the institution-wide application-per-place metric used in the ranking published by newspapers).

5.2 Factors affecting the likelihood of recruitment

The interviews with senior managers explored the factors which may influence institutions' recruitment of Diploma-holding applicants. One message was overwhelming: the key aim of the majority of institutions is to attract students who they believe *'can succeed at undergraduate level'*. Universities, living with the pressures of published rankings, are reluctant to take on young people who may drop out or do poorly in their degree, as this is one of the key metrics determining an institution's ranking. Therefore, their key aim is to recruit learners who can meet specified entry requirements and appear to be *'motivated'*, *'enthusiastic'* and *'committed'*, regardless of the type of qualification they may previously have gained.

No unprompted reference was made under this heading to the curriculum content of Diplomas (for this topic, see section 2). Moreover, when prompted, most respondents did not consider that there were specific factors - for example, institutional widening participation targets; demographics; the scale and nature of take-up of Diplomas, the appropriateness of learning styles to undergraduate study - that made recruitment of Diploma-holders more or less likely (although respondents at two institutions mentioned specifically that they would be monitoring employers' views on Diplomas).

In our sample, 'recruiting' institutions, in particular, welcomed the prospect of Diploma applicants as an additional pool from which to recruit. Even so, one such institution said it was intending to *'wait and see'* what position other, similar institutions took in relation to recruitment.

6. Involvement with the development and delivery of Diplomas

Key findings and implications for policy

- Four institutions of the 19 had been involved in the development of Diploma specifications; a further four institutions were currently involved in delivery. Most HEIs did not see involvement in delivery as part of their role.

Implications for policy

It is not necessary for all HEIs to be involved in Diploma development. It is, however, important that those which are involved in influencing Diploma Development Partnerships do so in ways recognised and approved in their academic peer/disciplinary community, to enhance the status of the Diploma as a valued pathway into higher education in general.

6.1 Involvement in development

PVCs were asked whether their institution had had any involvement with the **development** of the first five lines of learning. The question had been posed to investigate involvement with the drawing up of Diploma specifications, but some respondents interpreted it more broadly, to encompass involvement with a local consortium or work with a local school/college in reviewing the specifications and advising on schemes of work.

Fewer than half the 19 institutions sampled reported involvement at any level with Diploma development; this was not seen as problematic by individual respondents. Four PVCs (two in 'research-intensive'; two in 'teaching-led' institutions) reported their institution's engagement with the development of Diploma specifications. In all cases, this related to the Engineering Diploma. In addition, five PVCs (all in 'teaching-led' institutions) reported institutional involvement in curriculum development at a local level. Three of these HEIs had a history of close partnership working with local FE colleges. This type of involvement was felt to provide an opportunity to influence teaching and learning in a way that should ensure applications to that institution's undergraduate course(s) from students with relevant knowledge and skills, as the comment below exemplifies:

We've been able to get heavily involved in Diploma design and to shape this to suit our beliefs and needs.

The interviews with PVCs had suggested low levels of involvement with Diploma development by university staff. The survey of admissions tutors confirmed this. Of the 62 surveyed, ten (16 per cent) reported some involvement. Of these, nine were based in 'teaching-led' institutions. The nature of engagement was varied: assisting in the consortium bid; involvement with Diploma development, for example, working with E-Skills (the Sector Skills Council for Business & IT); developing schemes of work with local schools; promoting the Diplomas as part of the Aim Higher programme; providing work experiences for students; and professional development activity for teachers.

6.2 Involvement in delivery

HEI involvement with Diploma **delivery** was also not widespread among the 19 institutions sampled. Four PVCs (three in 'teaching-led' institutions) reported activity by academic staff in this context. In most cases, few details were available, as the following comments illustrate:

Some individual academic staff have probably got involved in Diploma delivery on a voluntary basis.

A couple of staff are involved through the local FE college. We saw it as valuable to get some exposure of our faculty to Diplomas.

In contrast, the fourth PVC reported an extensive support network from the institution to schools, relating to each line of learning being delivered by the local consortium from September 2008:

In each line of learning we have named tutors who are available (on call) to local schools who've decided to introduce this particular line of learning. These folks can be thrown in at a moment's notice to help schools with the implementation and indeed with the teaching. We have the notion of a pedagogue or subject expert in residence - we're prepared to put them into school for a day and for them to get involved in an intense set of learning experiences, some of which will be didactic teaching, and some will be quite different. We're prepared to timetable our staff to release them to do that.

The perception of this institution was that 'local schools lack confidence in terms of the delivery'. Its involvement was aimed at ensuring 'quality, through an involvement in delivery and implementation of the 14-19 reforms at school level'.

Amongst the admissions tutors surveyed, only three reported any personal involvement with Diploma delivery, all being based in 'teaching-led' institutions. The involvement was described as:

Preparing teaching resources pre and post-16.

Providing Masters courses for teachers involved in pre-16 delivery.

We're involved in courses for teachers involved in delivery pre-16, the 14-19 network for learning, and initial teacher training for teachers of Diplomas.

Senior managers in institutions not currently involved in delivery held mixed views as to the desirability of such engagement. Of those in favour, some felt that HE involvement would enhance the credibility of Diplomas; others identified benefits for their own institutions in terms of recruitment. Amongst those strongly opposed to involvement, the reasons cited included: lack of expertise of university staff in teaching younger learners; workload/capacity issues; and concerns about equality of opportunity: 'We don't deliver A levels, so why would we deliver Diplomas? Why privilege one group over another?'

7. Overall attitude toward Diplomas at this stage

Key findings and implications for policy

- The 'research-intensive' universities are more likely to examine closely the academic rigour of Diploma content; linked to this, comparatively lower levels of support for Diplomas among academic staff at this early stage were also noted in these universities. By contrast, in 'teaching-led' institutions it was reported that there was generally strong internal support for Diplomas. It should, however, be noted that, at the time of this survey, the more cautious approach of the 'research-intensive' institutions did not appear to be based on detailed knowledge of the specific content of the first five lines of learning.
- Concerning other themes, there were common responses from institutions of all types: support for the breadth of learning inherent in Diplomas, their potential to widen participation and the Extended Project component; the view that success would depend on student quality and preparedness for undergraduate study; and concerns that Diplomas may widen disparity between types of HEI.

Implications for policy

Two related and central themes have emerged. Firstly, there is broad and strong support across all types of HEIs in England for essential design aspects of Diplomas and their potential to bring new types of student and styles of learning into higher education. Secondly, the first three years of Diplomas at Level 3 will be important in determining the image and reputation of this new qualification. As such, HEIs will be monitoring evidence relating to: the calibre (and, to an extent, the volume) of students guided onto these Level 3 programmes; their ability during the course of study to show commitment to their chosen sphere of knowledge; and the effectiveness with which they have been taught in schools and colleges prior to seeking progression to undergraduate study.

7.1 The attractiveness of Diplomas to HEIs

Most attractive features

When asked about the features of Diplomas they find most attractive, senior managers across the sample of institutions (including five of the six 'research-intensives') welcomed first and foremost, their **breadth** and their potential to increase the **range of students' skills**, including those linked to employability, as the following comments illustrate:

I think probably that the most attractive feature is the range of learning skills that the students will develop, and the way in which Diplomas might present people with a route into HE who might not otherwise be able to tick any of our boxes, as it were.

The most attractive feature is the variety of ingredients in the Diploma design. It should stretch the students and it looks attractive.

I think it probably is the combination of the applied and the theoretical forms of study, because I'm conscious that what we're doing in terms of first degrees is shaped by an awareness that students have then got to go to work - employability; transferable skills.

In addition, Diplomas were welcomed for their potential in **widening participation** - both in the context of one 'research-intensive' HEI that foresaw the scope to broaden the existing social composition of its undergraduates, and in several 'teaching-led' HEIs which anticipated the likelihood of enrolling some Diploma entrants who would not otherwise have sought HE entry at all. Some typical comments included:

First, they bring potentially quite a different type of student to [name of institution] (we are currently white and middle class); so they could help our aim of heterogeneity amongst our student body. Second, they bring potentially different types of learners, perhaps: students who come in and challenge us, who force us to ask questions about how students learn and what we provide. These students will be challenging amongst their peers and add to debate/discussion: the mix in the class could be really terrific.

Young people doing Diplomas who might not have come to uni. otherwise. They may help with WP [widening participation].

If they engage a different group of students. Expansion of HE and raising aspirations is important.

The Extended Project was also mentioned positively by all types of institutions in the sample (see also section 3.3) in terms of the learning approaches it encompasses, as the two comments below exemplify:

Broader approaches to learning, for example, the Extended Project, will develop skills which a lot of school students currently don't have - that's positive.

We all like the Extended Project - it resonates with what HE likes: critical thinking; analysis and synthesis; research skills. That's one area we're welcoming.

Least attractive features

Among HEIs with the highest entry standards there was some concern about the likely academic **rigour of Diploma content**, including mathematics elements where these were seen as decisive (for example, in Engineering and some areas of IT), as one typical comment indicates:

A concern amongst 'research-intensive' universities, like ourselves, is the challenge of combining the approach to learning methods with academic rigour. I know there's been a lot of discussion about the maths content for the Engineering Diploma, for example.

However, this cautious approach appeared often to be based on a perception, rather than detailed knowledge of the specific content of the first five lines of learning.

In those HEIs with a predominantly teaching mission, a range of separate concerns was aired: that the new qualification will compete with others that are well established, such as BTECs (a view also shared by one of the 'research-intensives'), that scepticism in FE or among employers will damage the image of Diplomas; and that elements of the curriculum might be repeated before and after HE entry, as the two comments below illustrate:

There is scepticism in the local FE community that Diplomas were really needed, given that the BTEC is a recognised and respected qualification.

I have personal anxiety as to how the curriculum is going to work and develop. This worry is shared internally - especially whether Diploma applicants in 2010 will end up repeating work once they get to us.

Levels of support for Diplomas

None of the managers in 'research-intensive' HEIs reported high levels of internal support for Diplomas at this stage. Phrases used were: 'degrees of scepticism', 'cautious', 'a way to go', 'quite cynical'. In contrast, half of the HEIs characterised by a predominantly teaching 'mission' used different phrases: 'a great deal of support across the board', 'support is strong', 'seen as legitimate', some departments are 'very positive'. The remainder reported a generally cautious stance among staff at this stage.

7.2 Views on Diploma image and likely success

Across the sample, a majority of senior managers of HEIs indicated that it may take time for HEIs to form a judgement about Diplomas. They highlighted that 'success' and a 'good image' would, in the crucial early years of operation, be related to the **perceived quality of Diploma-holders** seeking entry to HE, including the extent to which Diploma learning prepared learners in schools and colleges effectively for undergraduate study (see also sections 2.3 and 5). The following comments are typical of those made by many of the senior managers:

This will all depend on the quality of the work undertaken. In principle, Diplomas can find their place in the 16-18 mix for selecting universities.

We need to 'suck it and see'. We will need to experience three cohorts from 2010 before we can assess their full merit. It is important that the early Diploma lines come through strongly.

It will come out in the wash, won't it? We will need to monitor the progress and success of the young people as undergraduates. It will take us a few years to form a view on that.

Other more specific responses relating to prospects for Diplomas included: the strength of endorsement from employers and from Russell Group universities, reservations perceived among headteachers, the effectiveness of guidance offered to year 11 learners, the ability of the political parties to agree a shared vision for Diplomas, and the speed of implementation.

7.3 Implications for HEIs of Diploma implementation

Two-thirds of the 'research-intensive' HEI respondents and one other from a mid-ranking institution said (unprompted and using almost identical language) that they considered Diplomas 'more relevant to post-1992 universities'. Respondents at two of these newer universities thought that Diplomas might well be ignored by elite institutions, so creating a bigger divide between 'selecting' and 'recruiting' HEIs.

Alongside these senior management perspectives, we asked admissions tutors about the potential impact on the **culture of their undergraduate courses** were Diploma-holding applicants to be admitted. The findings are set out in Table 4.

Table 4 - Departmental admissions tutors' views on the potential impact of Diploma-holding students on the culture of their undergraduate courses

	Strongly agree %	Agree %	Disagree %	Strongly disagree %	Don't Know %	Missing %
Diplomas will result in a more diverse set of learning styles in undergraduate cohort	2	37	24	2	31	5
Diplomas will result in a student cohort from broader range of social backgrounds	2	32	34	2	27	3
Diploma students are likely to have depth of subject knowledge required to succeed	2	21	18	6	50	3
Diploma students are likely to have appropriate level of study skills to succeed	2	45	13	2	35	3
Diploma students are likely to need more study skills support than current undergraduate cohort	2	16	37	2	40	3
Diploma students are likely to need more pastoral support than current undergraduate cohort	0	3	32	3	56	5
Diploma students are less likely to achieve a good degree than current undergraduate cohort	5	0	39	6	47	3
Diploma students are more likely to secure a graduate level job than current undergraduate cohort	2	3	27	5	60	3
N = 62						

Source: NFER / Exeter evaluation of Diplomas: Questionnaire survey of 62 HEI departmental admissions tutors, November / December 2008
Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100

The patterns of response showed little difference between those who were tutors in the 'research-intensive' universities and those in the 'teaching-led' institutions. Where there were differences, compared to respondents in 'teaching-led' institutions those in 'research-intensive' universities were:

- less likely to expect from Diploma-holders:
 - 'depth of subject knowledge required to succeed' on undergraduate courses in my department' (64 per cent of 'research-intensive', compared to 13 per cent of 'teaching-led')
 - an 'appropriate level of study skills to succeed on undergraduate courses in my department' (36 per cent of 'research-intensive', compared to eight per cent of 'teaching-led' institutions)
- more likely to assume that Diploma-holders would require additional 'study skills support than our current undergraduate cohort' (36 per cent of 'research-intensive', compared to 13 per cent of 'teaching-led' institutions).

8. Conclusion

Summary

This survey was designed to be representative of the English higher education sector. It revealed important attitudes and outlooks relating to the prospects for Diplomas which are shared **in common** among the HEIs surveyed, regardless of type:

- Institutions of all types welcome the breadth of learning inherent in Diplomas and their potential to widen participation.
- All regard the range of learning styles fostered by Diplomas to be well aligned with developments already in hand to refine and develop undergraduate learning.
- All feel sufficiently prepared at this stage to engage fairly and consistently with those from the first Diploma cohort seeking entry to HE in 2010. All had completed initial assessment of which Diplomas, among the first five lines of learning, appear suitable and relevant as preparation for entry to the undergraduate courses that they offer and they expected to post specific entry requirements (including Additional and Specialist Learning components) on their websites during 2009.
- All wished only to recruit students (including, from 2010, those holding Diplomas) whom they believed would succeed and thrive on undergraduate courses.
- All but one expected to follow the UCAS tariff in regarding an Advanced Diploma as equivalent in 'size' and 'status' to 3.5 A levels.
- All but two anticipated specifying Additional and/or Specialist Learning, most commonly in the form of attainment in an A level subject.
- All but three reported active partnerships with local schools and colleges but HEIs did not expect Diploma-based entry from 2010 to alter the current geographical pattern of their undergraduate recruitment.
- Most saw Diplomas as providing young people with either a specialised pathway to related areas of undergraduate study or, potentially, as being suitable for entry to courses in some other subject areas.
- Four had been involved in development of Diploma specifications (all in Engineering); involvement in local curriculum development or delivery of Diploma was not a high priority.
- Only two expected the foundation degrees they offered to be the preferred entry point for Diploma-holding applicants.

In some key areas of the survey, the attitudes and expectations of staff in the 'research-intensive' institutions **differed** from those institutions where teaching is the dominant aspect of the institutional 'mission'.

- The ‘research-intensive’ institutions were:
 - more likely to examine closely the academic rigour of Diploma content
 - less likely to assume that Diploma study would turn out to have been adequate preparation for HE entry.
- Levels of internal support (that is, among departmental tutors) were higher for Diplomas in the ‘teaching-led’ institutions and these HEIs were more likely to assume Diploma applicants would be recruited in 2010, across lines of learning.

Related to this, most senior managers interviewed in the ‘research-intensive’ institutions saw Diplomas as most relevant to undergraduate recruitment by the newer universities. Managers in seven of the 19 HEIs anticipated in various ways that Diplomas had the potential to widen the divide between the ‘recruiting’ and ‘selecting’ universities.

The HEIs surveyed expected to recruit a small number of Diploma-holders in 2010. This was seen as unproblematic given that: learners embarking on Diplomas in September 2008 may not have received the advice concerning the Additional and Specialist Learning for HE entry that their successors will be given; and small numbers in 2010 would enable institutions to consider applicants on a case-by-case basis.

The overall sentiment expressed by senior manager interviewees concerning prospects for Diplomas may be summarised as ranging from that of general caution to considerable enthusiasm (the latter especially on the part of the ‘teaching-led’ institutions).

Policy Implications

Seven key areas with implications for policy have been identified from the main findings. These are:

- *Match of Diploma design to developments in undergraduate education*

The design of the Diploma qualification, in terms of the types of learning and forms of assessment, resonates with developments in undergraduate teaching and learning across all kinds of HE institution. Those Diploma lines which develop a clear identity and reputation have the potential to:

- strengthen this connection by assisting HEIs in their goal of increasing selectiveness, according to their specific ‘mission’ and portfolio of courses
- find their niche within the wide array of undergraduate provision on offer in England.

- *Potential impact of Diplomas on HEIs*

While it was evident that senior managers within HEIs have received a considerable amount of information in relation to Diplomas and feel well informed about the qualification in general, it might be useful for information relating to the specific lines of learning to be developed, targeted at HE departmental admissions tutors.

High-quality teaching of Diplomas at Level 3 and able, motivated learners will be essential if strong progression to higher education is to be secured.

- *Admissions policies in relation to Diplomas*

Once the specific requirements for undergraduate course admissions in 2011 are published (during 2009), it will be crucial that school and college staff responsible for advising young people in year 11 about post-16 choices are fully informed of these and communicate them speedily and effectively to students and their parents.

With small numbers of Diploma-holders seeking HE entry in 2010, it is likely that most or all will have their complete profile reviewed by admissions teams (and will, possibly, be interviewed). This may mitigate the problem of these learners, in 2008, having chosen Additional and Specialist Learning (ASL) in the absence of published HE entry requirements.

- *The formal status of Diplomas in HE*

Diploma reputation should be strengthened by the intention of senior managers in all types of HEI to accord applicants holding Diplomas at Level 3 the same status as A level students. Such applicants were not considered as better suited to Foundation degree provision or requiring 'special consideration' within the framework of progression agreements with local partners.

- *Qualities required of Diploma applicants to HE in 2010*

For the reputation of Level 3 Diplomas to be enhanced in the early years when numbers are small, HE staff are saying that schools and colleges need to recruit to Diploma learners who have the ability, enthusiasm and level of commitment required to succeed as undergraduates.

- *Involvement with the development and delivery of Diplomas*

It is not necessary for all HEIs to be involved in Diploma development. It is, however, important that those which are involved in influencing Diploma Development Partnerships do so in ways recognised and approved in their academic peer/disciplinary community, to enhance the status of the Diploma as a appropriate pathway into higher education in general.

- *Overall attitude of HEIs toward Diplomas at this stage*

There is broad and strong support across all types of HEI in England for essential design aspects of Diplomas, and their potential to bring new types of student and styles of learning into higher education.

The first three years of Diplomas at Level 3 will be important in determining the image and reputation of this new qualification. As such, HEIs will be monitoring evidence relating to: the calibre (and, to an extent, the volume) of students guided onto these Level 3 programmes; their ability during the course of study to show commitment to their chosen sphere of knowledge; and the effectiveness with which they have been taught in schools and colleges prior to seeking progression to undergraduate study.

Future research

We expect to re-engage next with these 19 institutions when we conduct our third HEI survey in the evaluation series (Easter 2011). This will be an important opportunity to:

- gauge how they are working with their first cohort of Diploma-holding undergraduates
- explore how the reality of Diploma progression from school / college to higher education has compared with the hopes and expectations expressed in prospect during October-December 2008.

9. Reference

HESA, 06/07. Higher Education Statistics Agency, statistics online. Table 0a - All students by institution, mode of study, level of study, gender and domicile, 2006/07

Available at:

<http://www.hesa.ac.uk/dox/dataTables/studentsAndQualifiers/download/institution0607.xls?v=1.0>

Glossary of terms

Admissions tutors

These are academic staff (lecturers) within university departments who decide whether or not to offer an applicant a place on an undergraduate programme in their department. The department decides the entry requirements for its programmes and publishes these in its prospectus and on its website. Applications are received by the department, scrutinised by the admissions tutor(s), and, if appropriate, a letter offering the applicant a place, and detailing any conditions to be met, is sent out by the department to the applicant. If an interview or the setting of a supplementary test is considered appropriate, as is sometimes the case in selecting institutions, the admissions tutor would invite the applicant for interview. (See also: 'Central Admissions').

Central Admissions

Historically, applications to undergraduate programmes in HEIs were made to departmental-level admissions tutors. There has recently been a trend towards the centralisation of the admissions process in many institutions. Although entry requirements are still largely determined at departmental level, a Central Admissions unit, staffed by administrators, undertakes the administrative functions described under the 'Admissions tutors' entry, above. Some institutions have retained the tradition of decisions over admissions being made at the level of tutors in departments, but this role is now mainly limited to considering atypical applications, such as candidates with qualifications other than A levels, or mature students with relevant experience rather than qualifications. In such cases, the applicant may be interviewed by the departmental admissions tutor before a decision is made as to whether to make an offer. (See also: 'Admissions tutors').

Compact agreements

A Compact is a formal, non-binding agreement between partner institutions, usually schools / colleges and an HEI or group of employers. In the HE context, it may set out target attainments or other measures of achievement for individual students, related to admission and aimed at motivating students in those schools/colleges to progress into higher education. The precise elements of the Compact will differ from partnership to partnership but may include: advice and guidance from the HEI on the UCAS application process, for example, writing a personal statement, a mock interview, if appropriate; a guaranteed offer of a place to an applicant predicted to meet a programme's entry requirements; and, in some cases, a lower offer than that made to other applicants.

Head of Admissions

The person leading and managing the Central Admissions team, responsible to the senior management of the university for: implementing the institution's admissions policy and targets; disseminating information on new qualifications to departments; and ensuring the smooth running of the applications process.

Higher education institutions (HEIs)

These are divided between: universities which have their own degree-awarding powers and, typically, offer a wide range of teaching programmes; and smaller, more specialised colleges of higher education (where degree programmes may be validated by a partner university) or free-standing specialist institutes. Currently there are 105 HEIs in England in membership of Universities UK (UUK), complemented by a further 17 free-standing colleges.

Higher education 'league tables' / published rankings

There is a wealth of statistical information about the sector made available by the Higher Education Statistics Agency. Over the last decade leading newspapers have used this and other data to compile 'league tables'/published rankings of performance. Among the most influential is *The Times Good University Guide*, where the eight measures of institutional performance (aggregated into an overall ranking) are: student satisfaction; research quality; student–staff ratio; services and facilities spend; undergraduate entry standards; undergraduate completion; proportion of undergraduates gaining a 1st or 2.1 degree classification; graduate employment / further study.

Mid-ranking HEIs

In the report we use this term to describe institutions in our sample which are neither 'research-intensive' nor 'teaching-led' in the ways described elsewhere in the glossary. Often these institutions are universities of relatively long standing which have 'pockets' of research specialism alongside a strong commitment to teaching. They tend to sit in the mid-range of newspapers' published rankings.

Mission groups

97 of the 122 English HEIs are now also members of one of the five UK HE mission groups – the associations of institutions that share common priorities in balancing the work of teaching, research and outreach to the community. The five groups are:

- *Russell Group*. 16 English members - mainly the larger, ancient and 'civic' universities. Strongly committed to research.
- *1994 Group*. 17 English members - mainly the smaller, campus-based foundations, often of 1950s' and 1960s' origins. Strongly committed to research.
- *Million +*. 24 English members - universities of recent designation and mainly of a larger size, with a strong emphasis on teaching and 'widening participation'.
- *University Alliance*. 19 English members, plus the Open University – mainly universities of recent designation, mixed in size and with a strong emphasis on teaching and 'widening participation'.
- *Guild HE*. 21 English members. Smaller institutions which remain or, were until recently, free-standing colleges of higher education.

ProVice-Chancellor

Typically (although job titles vary), HEIs have a senior team of academic managers led by a Vice-Chancellor and assisted by several Pro Vice-Chancellors. One of these will usually be assigned responsibility for teaching and learning within the institution concerned.

Recruiting institutions

These are HEIs where all or the majority of undergraduate courses are under-subscribed and places are still available in August. These courses will attempt to fill their places at that time, usually through the UCAS Clearing process. Some students accepted onto courses at these institutions may therefore have lower grades than the advertised entry requirements. (See also: 'Selecting institutions').

Research Assessment Exercise

The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) occurs periodically across UK higher education and measures the research performance of groups of academic staff at subject level, via peer review. In general, there is a strong correlation between the research quality of departmental academic staff and competitive entry to the undergraduate programmes they offer.

Research-intensive HEIs

These universities (along with some specialist institutes) accord a high priority to the research activity of their staff. They also dominate the top places in HE 'league tables'/published rankings. Their membership comprises, largely, the 20 Russell Group HEIs and 18 1994 Group HEIs. (See also: 'Teaching-led HEIs').

Selecting institutions

These are HEIs where all or the majority of undergraduate courses are over-subscribed and there is competition for places. These tend to be the Russell Group and 1994 Group institutions. Students in these institutions will have met the advertised entry requirements. For some programmes, an interview and / or supplementary tests may be used to differentiate between applicants predicted to attain the same high grades. (See also: 'Recruiting institutions').

Teaching-led HEIs

Many of the largest and the smallest HEIs have their origins in the polytechnic and HE colleges sectors, respectively. The main focus of their mission is teaching. Those with university status are often referred to within the sector as a 'post 1992' institution. They fill mainly the lower places in HE 'league tables'/published rankings. (See also: 'Research-intensive HEIs').

Unaligned institutions

These institutions (26 out of the 122 English HEIs) have chosen to remain independent of any 'mission group'. They are varied in the nature and balance of their activities.

Widening participation

In recent years, as higher education has expanded rapidly but the access to it of disadvantaged groups has failed to keep pace, there has been much focus on initiatives to encourage undergraduate applications from those who have no experience of higher education in their family.

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