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Controlled assessments in 14–19 Diplomas: implementation and effects on learning experiences

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The Principal Learning components of 14–19 Diplomas (introduced in England in 2008) are assessed predominantly via “controlled assessments”. These assessments are conducted within the learning context under specified conditions (or “controls”) and require learners to apply their skills to work-related tasks. In this research, teachers and learners at 6 consortia (groups of schools/colleges working together to deliver Diplomas) were interviewed about how controlled assessments in the Diploma qualifications were affecting teaching and learning experiences.

The nature of the assessments was seen as encouraging learning and facilitating a less didactic learning environment. The assessments were generally considered less pressurised than traditional assessments, and most learners found the assessment tasks enjoyable and motivating. The assessments were reportedly encouraging the development of valuable skills (e.g., teamwork, communication, independent working) and improving students’ confidence. However, there was some evidence that not all teachers had yet fully understood the requirements around the assessment “controls”.

Keywords: educational assessment; 14–19 Diplomas; Principal Learning; controlled assessment; learning experiences

Introduction

The introduction of the 14–19 Diplomas was a response to complaints from employers that young people are not sufficiently prepared for the world of work. The Diplomas, which were part of government education reforms set out in 2005 (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2005a, 2005b), are intended to address this by emphasising skills such as problem solving, teamwork, communication, and independent working (Longstowe, 2009). As a result of the nature of some of the skills to be assessed in the sector-/subject-related components of the Diplomas, internal assessment has an important role in the form of “controlled assessments”. Given the novel nature of the Diploma and of controlled assessments, this small-scale study was designed to explore the implementation and effects of controlled assessments within the Principal Learning Components of Phase 1 14–19 Diplomas.

The wider government education reforms at the time of the introduction of the Diploma had the broader aims of providing an education system with high-quality

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learning routes for young people not motivated by traditional qualifications, which avoids student disengagement and non-participation, which challenges the most able learners and ensures all learners reach certain standards of achievement in the basics (such as English and maths) (DfES, 2005a; Longstowe, 2009). Therefore, the priorities were: the “basics” (as embodied by functional skills courses which form part of the Diploma); better curriculum choice which provides a broad education and combines general education and practical experience allowing progression to further learning and employment; providing more stretching options and activities, backed by greater flexibility; and enhancing student motivation and engagement to encourage those at risk of dropping out of education to continue (DfES, 2005a). The introduction of the Diploma was central to the government implementation plan for achieving these priorities.

The Diploma is a composite qualification made up of three elements: Principal Learning (sector-/subject-related learning); Generic Learning (including a project, work experience, functional skills in English, mathematics, and IT, and Personal Learning and Thinking Skills); and Additional and Specialist Learning (learning selected from a range of options to complement or extend the Principal Learning). Instead of being taught by an individual school or college, Diploma courses are provided by consortia consisting of small clusters of schools and/or colleges working collaboratively and “sharing” learners. (Note that the new government plans to relax this structure and allow individual schools and colleges to offer Diplomas.) Diplomas are available at three levels: Level 1 – foundation (equivalent to grades D to G at General Certificate of Secondary Education [GCSE]), Level 2 – higher (equivalent to grades A* to C at GCSE), and Level 3 – advanced (equivalent to AS and A levels). The Diploma has been introduced in phases over several years with 14 Diplomas in different “lines of learning” available in total. (A further three Diplomas in more “academic” domains were also planned, but their development was ceased by the new government.) The first five Diplomas (in creative and media; construction and the built environment; engineering; information technology (IT); and society, health, and development) began teaching in September 2008, and a further five began in September 2009. The Phase 3 Diplomas began teaching in September 2010. (Note that since the time of this research the new government has announced that it will not provide special support for the Diploma beyond 2013, and that schools and colleges will not be obliged to offer Diplomas as an “entitlement”. A further development is that components of the Diplomas, for example, Principal Learning components, can be offered as stand alone qualifications outside of the Diploma framework.)

A mixture of applied and theoretical learning is involved in Diploma programmes. They are intended to provide a rounded education rather than to restrict learners to a particular sector and to prepare learners for employment or university study. The Diplomas promote broad sector- or subject-related understanding and knowledge, and transferable thinking skills (Office of the Qualifications and Examination Regulator [Ofqual], 2009). The role of experiential learning is emphasised with learning through experience of tasks and contexts similar to real work situations.

The Principal Learning (PL) component is assessed mostly via internal assessments. This has advantages for validity in terms of assessing skills in more realistic ways than written examinations, but raises questions of how to quality control assessments and ensure they are robust. As a result, the idea of “controlled assessments”, as developed for use in GCSEs because of issues around coursework, became linked to Principal Learning (see Ertl et al., 2009). Thus, Diplomas became the first context in which controlled assessments were implemented. Controlled

assessments are internal assessments for which a number of controls (e.g., in relation to time allowed, supervision, collaboration) are applied at given levels to the tasks undertaken. A typical assignment in Diploma PL might involve learners completing a number of tasks towards an overall goal over a number of weeks, producing various artefacts to show the development process of the work, and reflecting on the work. The work is marked by teachers or tutors using awarding body marking criteria, and then marks are moderated by an awarding body appointed examiner.

Public debate and early evaluation findings have raised a number of concerns or questions about the Diploma. One criticism in public debate is the extent to which courses will prepare learners appropriately for university study and employment, and will be recognised as doing so. There are indications that higher education institutes welcome the breadth of learning in the Diploma programme and the possible widening of participation that it might facilitate (Richardson & Haynes, 2009). Representatives from those involved in Diploma development have expressed a good level of confidence in the Diplomas meeting the needs of employers, but slightly less confidence in meeting the needs of higher education (Ertl et al., 2009).

It is intended that the Diplomas offer an appropriate learning programme “for young people of all backgrounds and abilities” (DfES, 2006, p. 3). Whether this is the case has been subject to some discussion. O'Donnell et al. (2009) found that Year 9 and Year 11 learners who had chosen to follow, or were considering following, a Diploma programme tended to have lower prior attainment. However, they also found that many schools had set entry requirements for Level 2 Diplomas based on Key Stage 3 assessments, because of the need for learners to achieve the functional skills elements.

A number of practical challenges in implementing the Diplomas have been identified. There are issues around funding (Association of Colleges [AoC], 2009), achieving successful collaboration between schools and colleges (AoC, 2009), and logistical issues such as travel between sites and planning compatible timetabling (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills [Ofsted], 2009). However, early reports also identified significant enthusiasm for the Diploma. From interviews with teachers involved in the Diploma, O'Donnell et al. (2009) report that “overall, there seemed to be a sense of excitement across most consortia about delivering this new course” (p. 7). Students are reportedly finding the courses enjoyable and engaging because of the applied style of learning and because they offer something different (AoC, 2009; Garner, 2009; Ofsted, 2009).

A few insights are available regarding progress with the Diploma assessments. Interviews with consortium leads and other teachers in the spring and summer of 2008 (O'Donnell et al., 2009) suggest that assessment was a concern with some staff requesting further support and earlier provision of relevant documentation. Questions of how to go about standardising judgements across a consortium were a particular area where support and planning was felt to be needed. However, some teachers were due to attend training, and generally there was confidence that issues would be resolved over the summer. In an evaluation of implementation, Ofsted (2009) found that by spring 2009 progress in terms of formal assessment of Diploma work was described as “slow” with many consortia still developing their assessment procedures.

Given that controlled assessments were originally envisioned in the context of providing a more robust replacement for, or reform of, coursework in the GCSE, it is worth exploring the history and reasons for this change. The introduction of GCSE in the late 1980s brought a much increased use of teacher assessment in the UK's assessment culture, with coursework an integral requirement in many subjects. GCSE coursework is assessed by teachers, internally moderated between teachers

within a school, and externally moderated. The key impetus for the inclusion of coursework in GCSEs was the assertion that it can increase the validity of assessment by assessing a wider body of student work and valuing, encouraging, and measuring skills that are more difficult to assess in written examinations. These might include critical thinking, creativity, communication, reflective thinking, independent learning, and designing and conducting an experiment, survey, or investigation (Secondary Examinations Council [SEC], 1985, 1986). Coursework was also intended to motivate students through a realistic sense of audience, the opportunity to negotiate the task, and continual assessment (Ogborn, 1991; SEC, 1985, 1986). Many of these points resonate with the ethos of the Diploma. A focus on the learning that may arise through the process of assessment has gained further emphasis in the last decade or so. For example, Boud (2007a, 2007b) argues that assessment should be seen less as about how learning should be measured and more as how assessment can support learning. He argues that for students to learn they need to be engaged in a task, and for this to be the case they must view the task as worthwhile due to its nature and relevance (Boud, 2007a). Similar motivations lie behind the notion of “assessment for learning” (see, e.g., Gardner, 2006; Gardner, Harlen, Hayward, & Stobart, 2010), which has been the basis of various initiatives in the UK to facilitate classroom assessment which supports learning. Whilst small-scale local initiatives of this kind have often been successful, wider schemes have sometimes suffered due to issues such as lack of teacher buy-in (see, e.g., Gardner, Harlen, Hayward, & Stobart, 2008). In contexts such as the GCSE, teacher buy-in may be less of a concern, but there remains a question of whether we can expect school-based assessments to successfully meet the dual purpose of assessing to support learning and assessing to provide a measure of achievement (an example of the “double duty” of assessment, Boud, 2000) when the outcomes are high stakes.

The validity and reliability of GCSE coursework assessment has been subject to much discussion with the focus of concerns changing over time. When GCSEs were introduced, the main worries related to possible unreliability of teacher marking, potential for cheating, and a concern that girls might perform better than boys because of the assessment type (see Qualifications and Curriculum Authority [QCA], 2006b). Other concerns that have been raised relate to fairness and authenticity (including the issues of internet plagiarism and excessive assistance from others), tasks becoming somewhat formulaic and overly structured (and hence reducing benefits to learning), and the cumulative assessment burden for students of coursework across subjects.

Despite the perceived advantages of coursework to validity, concerns such as the burden of assessment perceived to be created by coursework led to QCA being asked to reconsider the value of coursework (see DfES, 2005b). Their review included questionnaires, interviews with teachers, students, and parents, and collecting views from examiners (MORI, 2006; QCA, 2005, 2006a, 2006b). The review found that Heads of Department were fairly positive about coursework, particularly in certain subjects with oral or practical coursework and that nearly all acknowledged the benefits to students (MORI, 2006). Concerns amongst teachers about plagiarism were not as great as might have been expected, but the burden of marking was a reported drawback. Many teachers were opposed to the removal of coursework (MORI, 2006), and the perceived positive impact of coursework on teaching and learning was felt to outweigh the drawbacks (QCA, 2005). Despite this positive picture, some of the key issues around burden for students and plagiarism resulted in

the decision to remove coursework from mathematics and replace coursework with controlled assessments in other GCSE subjects. Controlled assessments still allow for the assessment of work conducted in class over a period of time in the same way as coursework (thus hopefully keeping some of the perceived positive benefits), but controls are set out in relation to task setting, task taking, and task marking. The levels of control applied vary between subjects and qualifications. One model, for example, might be that the awarding body provide a set of projects each year for students to choose from, that these are conducted under more controlled conditions than might previously have been the case for coursework (e.g., most work conducted at school under teacher supervision and within an approximate time limit, thus enhancing consistency of conditions between schools, making plagiarism less likely, and authentication of student work easier), and work being marked by teachers and subject to internal and external moderation procedures. The nature of the tasks conducted for controlled assessments may be broadly similar to those previously conducted for coursework (e.g., a fieldwork task in geography), but it is intended that the controls make it easier to ensure authenticity and reliability and to make the tasks more manageable for students and teachers.

Although the notion of “controlled assessment” was originally envisioned for use in GCSEs, it is in the Diploma Principal Learning where it has first been implemented. The controls are defined in relation to the way that assessment tasks are set, the conditions under which the tasks are taken, and the way they are marked. For the Phase 1 Diplomas, the controls for internal assessments in each Diploma line of learning are defined as high, medium, or limited for the following aspects of control:

- task setting;
- task taking:
 - (a) authenticity control;
 - (b) feedback control;
 - (c) time control;
 - (d) collaboration control;
 - (e) resource control;
 - (f) evidence specific controls;
- task marking.

The levels of control are set out in awarding body specifications for Diploma PL and are indicated in model assignments.

Method

Research questions

This research aimed to explore issues relating to the internal assessments/controlled assessments that contribute to the Principal Learning of the Diplomas. The following research questions were explored:

- How is the concept of “controlled assessment” understood and is it seen as different to existing types of internal assessment?
- Are the “controls” understood and applied appropriately and consistently?
- What are the reported effects of controlled assessment on the nature of learning experiences?

- Do the controls appear to limit learning experiences?
- What are the reported effects of the controlled assessments on the skills developed?
- What are the reported effects of the controlled assessments on student motivation and enjoyment?

Participants

Six consortia were recruited to be involved in the study by contacting domain assessors for different lines of learning. For each consortium, a visit to one of the centres (or in one case two centres) was arranged. Two of the consortia visited were running the Creative and Media Diploma, two were running IT, one was running Engineering, and another Society, Health, and Development. All of the teachers visited were involved in running the Higher Diploma (Level 2). In one case, they were also running the Advanced Level Diploma (Level 3), and in another they were also running the Foundation Diploma (Level 1). The number of consortia visited and teachers and students interviewed was unfortunately limited by the relatively small number of consortia running the qualifications, particularly in the first year of implementation, and by issues of negotiating access to already busy students and teachers.

Interviews

At each consortium, between one and four teachers were interviewed. At all except one consortium, a number of learners were also interviewed. At one consortium, it was not possible to interview learners as they were not available due to examinations. Eleven teachers and 27 learners in total were interviewed. All participants were made aware of the purpose of the research and that their comments would only be used anonymously. Learners were interviewed in pairs or groups of three so that the interviews were less daunting for them.

The interviews were semi-structured in nature and included questions on the themes that the research aimed to explore. There were separate interview schedules for teachers and learners although with some overlap of content (see Appendix 1). In each case, there were a number of key interview questions which were asked to all participants; these were followed up with additional prompting by the researcher as appropriate, drawing on a number of planned potential follow-up questions (shown where relevant as part of the same numbered bullet points in Appendix 1).

The visits and interviewing took place between March and May 2009. The interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. The analysis involved two stages. Firstly, themes in the responses were identified, some of which related closely to particular interview questions or groups of questions, and comments were grouped together based on these themes. Secondly, the views of teachers and learners were summarised separately for each theme.

It should be noted that although the focus of the interview questions was often on the tasks completed for controlled assessment, students and teachers sometimes spoke of projects or tasks that would not be formally assessed but formed part of the learning process and generally mirrored the structure and nature of the controlled assignment tasks. Indeed, in some cases it was difficult to determine from the interviews whether the tasks being discussed would form part of the assessed work or

not. As far as possible, this was unpacked during the analysis and is reflected in the description of the findings.

Findings

The nature of tasks

In order to provide context for later discussions, the teachers and learners were asked about the assessment tasks currently being undertaken. Where model assignments were available, these were being used. Teachers felt this was the safer option in the first year to ensure work addressed the assessment criteria rather than to adapt them too heavily or propose their own. Some teachers and learners also described the kinds of practice tasks that they had been conducting, which mirrored the types of tasks involved in the final assignments. A flavour of the tasks used in each line of learning is given below. These relate to the units of work in each Diploma.

In IT, there were tasks involving using multimedia to create an advertisement or resource and on gathering information on types of communication used in work places and evaluating their effectiveness. Some tasks were linked to visits to different businesses. For Society, Health, and Development, learners were conducting a task about partnership working. Visits from a number of representatives of organisations and institutions (e.g., city council, police) took place in relation to this. Role plays, Powerpoint presentations, booklets, and posters were some of the outputs of the work.

Engineering assignments had been completed for three of the internally assessed units: those in electronics, maintenance, and design. The model assignments had been used, and these involved developing an electronics system to indicate the tilt of a vehicle, bike maintenance, and designing a modification to a lamp. For Creative and Media, one task involved promoting a performance (e.g., developing a poster or radio advert for their own cabaret show). At one of the Creative and Media consortia visited, they had not begun the assignments and were working formatively to prepare students for future assessments through similar kinds of tasks. The teachers wished to allow time for the learners to develop their skills without the pressure of assessment in the first year.

The general feeling from teachers was that the Diploma learning is broader and more interesting than that for GCSE. Five teachers noted that the nature of the assessments were not substantially different from those they were familiar with from other courses. However, Diploma assignments were felt to be more related to the world of work, more professional, and involve greater independence for students. Additionally, tasks were considered to be less teacher directed allowing more freedom for students to show creativity, to be more practical, to involve research, and to be more realistic. There is reportedly more time for reflection, exploration, and development. Several teachers reported that they were trying to make students understand what it is like to work in industry – which lies at the heart of the Diploma – and not just to meet the assessment criteria. One teacher had some negative views about the Diploma and felt that it was not as practical or vocational as promotional materials would suggest.

Learners perceived the type of assessment to be less pressured than assessments for other courses, with more time to develop ideas and engage with a task. Learners felt less as though teachers were constantly checking on their progress (as they did for GCSE coursework) and felt that they were treated more as adults. Additionally,

assessment tasks were more practical than for other assessments, and a common theme in student responses was that the tasks were relevant to the world of work. Of those learners who commented on their expectations of the course and assessments, most felt that they were as expected. However, some had not anticipated the amount of writing and other evidence that would be required. Several commented that some of the topics covered were unexpected. For example, in IT some learners expected there to be more technical content and less business-related topics.

Understanding of controls and confidence in their implementation

Over half of the teachers clearly expressed during interview that they were confident in how to apply the controls for the assignments. This was sometimes reportedly a result of being used to this type of assessment because it was already common for their subject area (suggesting that they do not see controlled assessments as different to other internal assessments such as coursework), because they had attended a course, or because they had been involved in Diploma development.

Two teachers felt that the guidelines on the controls were not problematically restrictive and allowed a certain amount of flexibility in how they required their learners to work. However, associated with this was the acknowledgement by these two teachers of the importance of authenticity in terms of not giving learners too much guided input, and of keeping a tighter “*rein*” on the assessed work than in previous years. The teachers tended to find it difficult to comment on whether the controls were being maintained across their consortium. Two teachers (from different consortia) were happy that the controls were being maintained across the consortium, but one commented that it had taken time for this shared understanding to be achieved through consortium meetings.

At one consortium, it was clear that the teacher had been through the controls with the learners. These students felt confident that they knew what the controls meant and that they knew what the boundaries were. They also commented that their teacher trusted them to follow the assignment rules which the learners liked.

Implementation of the controls

Collaborative work

In all four Phase 1 Diplomas researched, the level of control for task taking is “medium”. In terms of collaboration, this means that learners’ assessed work may be informed by working with others if group work is suggested in the model assignments, but the contribution of each learner must be clear and learners must provide individual responses.

Across the lines of learning and levels, teachers tended to report that group work was used for aspects of students’ work. Sometimes this was limited to tasks or activities that would not form part of the assessments, whilst in other cases group work did contribute to assessments. Where teamwork did or would contribute to the assessed work, most teachers did not feel that it was particularly problematic in terms of identifying the contributions of different individuals, but that it did require extra care. They reported that this was achieved through learners having clearly defined roles, learners writing individual plans and/or reports, and through teacher observation.

A few teachers commented that working successfully in groups was something that students needed to learn. One teacher noted that she changed the groups for different tasks so that individuals worked with different people. There were a few comments from teachers about the difficulties of group work for the learners and for themselves, in terms of group dynamics, differences in motivation or ability, and student absences.

Comments from learners aligned with those from teachers in relation to the use of group work. Some learners commented that they enjoyed group work and suggested that they learned more in this way, that it spread out the workload and was relevant to the business world. Some preferred assessments to be based on individual work. Some noted that the process was developing their skills for collaborative work and that group discussions built their own confidence. Some learners felt that working with others that they knew less well was sometimes challenging as individuals had different points of view. However, generally, group work seemed to be a supportive activity with students checking on the progress of others and supporting each other. Generally, learners were aware of the need for clearly defined roles within a team and the need to write individual reports.

Authenticity and supervision/working at home

The “medium” level of task-taking control for Phase 1 Diplomas means that most work for assessment must be completed under the direct or informal supervision of the teacher. However, some aspects of exploration can be outside of direct supervision as long as the teacher can authenticate the work and learners reference any sources.

All teachers were aware that students’ work for the assessments should be completed under supervision. However, there were some slight differences in views in relation to the strictness of this requirement. At one consortium, the teachers had initially interpreted “controlled assessment” to mean virtually the same as “exam conditions” and had conducted the first assessment with learners working in silence in the classroom under strict supervision. After finding this to be unpopular with learners and not conducive of good work, the teachers contacted the awarding body and were advised that exam conditions were not required. Some teachers noted that learners could do research at home and bring in their findings for use in their assessed work. In relation to working outside of the classroom, one teacher noted that it was difficult to control any work students might do at home and felt that this was a difficult issue. However, he emphasised to students that their work had to be their own. At one consortium, the need to use specialist equipment only available at the college was noted as a reason why assessed work could not be conducted at home. It was noted at this consortium that the requirement for assessed work to be supervised did not restrict learning experiences.

Learners’ interview responses about working at home were mixed and suggested some confusion. Some said they were not allowed to work at home because of the assessment controls. Others reported that whilst most work for their assessments should be completed in the classroom, they could conduct research at home and could, if necessary, finish off work at home if they were running out of time. Some students reported writing up elements of work at home; however, it was sometimes difficult to ascertain from students whether this was assessed work or not. At one consortium, the teachers organised supervised sessions at the end of the school day

for learners who needed to catch up. Some students who said they thought that they were not supposed to work at home had later found out that some classmates had worked at home. This suggests mixed understandings of controls within the same group of learners.

Feedback control/appropriate help

Teachers reported that they provide general support to students, such as feedback on broad areas for improvement of work, but they cannot and do not provide detailed advice as the students have to work independently, using their own ideas and taking responsibility for their own work.

Views relating to plagiarism and regarding whether the controls would reduce plagiarism issues compared to standard coursework assessment models were mixed. Three teachers felt that plagiarism issues were similar for controlled assessments as for coursework. However, over half of teachers did not think that plagiarism was likely to be a significant problem. Two of these teachers reported that the controls around the assessments were one reason that plagiarism would not be a problem. Others felt that the nature of their subject area or the tasks involved meant that plagiarism was unlikely to be a problem. For example, it was noted that film studies (within Creative and Media) and also Engineering inherently involve borrowing other people's ideas, and drama tasks (another strand of Creative and Media) involve writing up their own practical work meaning that they cannot copy an external source. It was also noted that there were currently limited resources available relating to the Diploma courses and that this limited the potential for plagiarism (e.g., as there is only one textbook available relating to each Diploma line, copying from the textbook would be easy to spot).

Most teachers commented on the need for vigilance and monitoring to avoid plagiarism going undetected. One college was currently planning to introduce plagiarism software for all qualifications they run, including the Diploma. At other consortia, measures included checking for irregularities in English skills, monitoring internet use, and monitoring any work brought into the classroom from home. Teachers tended to feel that plagiarism or inappropriate help would not go unnoticed.

There was a good understanding among most students regarding how much help they were allowed from teachers and others; however, a few students were less sure. Most learners reported that teachers could provide clarification of the tasks and a certain degree of guidance and support with work. For example, teachers could provide general feedback on a draft, perhaps pointing out a few sections that would benefit from further work. However, students knew that there was a limit on the assistance teachers could give and that they cannot give detailed instructions. The students realised that they had to come up with their own ideas about how to conduct the tasks and that the work had to be their own. Interestingly, one pair of learners compared the teacher support available in the Diploma PL internal assessments with that available with GCSE coursework, and felt that less specific help was provided in the Diploma.

Learners felt that they were allowed to ask parents or others for information (e.g., ask them about communication methods in their workplace as research for work on business communications for IT) but that they could not get help with the work they are to produce for their assessments. Additionally, a few students noted that they think their teacher would notice if they had received outside help.

Effects on teaching and learning and skills developed (washback)

Most of the comments from teachers about the impact of the course and assessments on teaching were positive. Learning in the Diploma PL was felt to be more interactive, with the teacher acting more as a facilitator and the work being lead by the learners. Around half of teachers felt that the teaching style and assessment type were similar to their usual practice. For example, one teacher commented that he is used to this kind of assessment as he usually teaches a subject involving a substantial proportion of coursework.

One teacher made a clear statement that they felt that controlled assessments were preferable to an exam because they provided a learning experience as well as an assessment. The more relaxed learning environment created around the Diploma, particularly in Further Education College contexts, was noted by some teachers.

Teachers and learners had a great deal to say about the skills that were being gained. Many of the comments referred to the skills learnt as relevant to “real life” and valuable in the “world of work”. For example, one student stated, “with a lot of the other teaching they’re teaching you to pass an exam rather than teaching you skills for outside of school – this is definitely teaching you for outside of school.”

Learners commented on some of the subject-specific skills they were developing, such as regarding how businesses use technologies (IT), artistic skills and photography (Creative and Media), and designing or developing devices (Engineering). Both teachers and learners commented on generic skills being developed through the tasks. These included:

- communication, teamwork;
- expressing ideas orally, presentation skills;
- planning their own work and time, project management, organisation, budgeting, meeting deadlines;
- computer skills;
- working independently, developing ideas, responsibility;
- research;
- thinking skills, reflection, evaluation, reviewing;
- report writing, structuring an argument, correct referencing of sources.

Teachers also commented on the development of the learners through the work, for example:

- “It’s quite nice to see them blossom ... at first they lack confidence.”
- “It’s making them whole people.”
- “I think it’s made the students a little more well rounded.”

It was apparent that Level 2 learners who spent some of their time being taught at a Further Education college were considered to have benefitted from this experience in terms of working in a more adult environment where they are expected to take responsibility for their own work, thus encouraging them to work more independently.

Several teachers commented that the assessments and learning experiences are less pressurised than for other courses. The learners have more freedom to experiment and take risks during their learning, and there is time for them to make

mistakes and work around them. It was felt that class time was less driven by the assessments but with work building up cumulatively. Teachers felt that the nature of the assessments suited certain students who do not show their best work when under pressure.

In general, teachers felt that the controls did not restrict the students' learning experiences or the tasks that students conducted. One teacher suggested that as time goes on and he has a greater understanding of the assessment requirements, he will hopefully be able to make the tasks more flexible by adapting them, thus helping to avoid any restrictions to learning experiences.

Enjoyment and motivation

In general, teachers felt that students enjoyed the course and the tasks and were generally motivated. Practical tasks and group work were reportedly enjoyed by learners, whilst writing up work and gathering evidence were less popular. The nature of the tasks and involvement with outside organisations were felt to be motivating. Whilst it took some time for students to adjust to the different way of learning promoted by the Diploma, they were reported to enjoy the flexibility of the learning experience and enjoy being treated more like adults. Several Further Education [FE] tutors who were teaching PL units to Level 2 students felt that learners liked the more adult atmosphere of the college, the access to specialist equipment and technology that it provided, and the greater independence. Additionally, teachers felt that learners could see the purpose of the work and that this was motivating. Three teachers thought that the motivation of students was partly a result of their intrinsic interest in the subject area. The extended duration of assessments, over a few days or weeks, was felt by teachers to place less pressure on learners than traditional written examinations and hence to be preferred.

Most learners reported enjoying the work and the assessment tasks and being motivated by them. However, some reported that some tasks (e.g., writing) were less motivating than others. Learners enjoyed and were motivated by practical "hands-on" activities, such as role plays and tasks involving designing or producing something. Collaborative work was popular, and some learners reported that they are motivated by group work because they do not want to let their peers down. Learners liked visits to other locations and consortium-wide induction days. The style of the assessment in the Diploma was preferred to exams by most learners. This was reportedly because the assessment is more relaxed and less teacher directed. Several students very clearly stated that they prefer their Diploma PL lessons to their other lessons and that they find the Diploma enjoyable "because it's different to normal school". In contrast, one learner noted that she did not enjoy the Diploma classes and found them uninteresting. This appeared to be a result of the course content being broader and more varied than she had expected.

Discussion and conclusion

This study provides some insights relating to the implementation and effects of assessments in Diploma Principal Learning courses. However, it must be acknowledged that only a small number of consortia were involved, and thus we cannot generalise to all consortia. Also, these consortia may represent teachers who are particularly enthusiastic and motivated given that they were some of the first to run

Diplomas, and thus they might not represent all future consortia. Additionally, it is both a strength and a limitation of the research that it was conducted in the first year of Diploma implementation. At this point, teachers and students were to some extent still getting to grips with the requirements, and only a small number of controlled assignments had been conducted. Further, as with all interview studies, the data are subjective and rely on self-report, and it is, for example, possible that participants may have adjusted their responses towards those that they consider socially acceptable. Extended observation-based studies could usefully take the current research further and provide a more objective view on some of the issues explored.

Some general findings relating to the Diploma (but not to the assessments) were identified from the research. Overall, there were many positive responses about the Diploma from both teachers and learners, although with some exceptions. The Diploma was generally welcomed in terms of the skills it promotes and the more flexible learning style that it provides. Most students seemed to be motivated by their Diploma PL courses, and visits to work places and organisations appeared to be a motivating factor. Diploma PL courses seemed to be creating less pressurised learning environments for students, with greater independent working. The flexibility of the learning experience and being treated in a more adult way appealed to learners. For students who were being at least partly taught in an FE College, this seemed to be a particular benefit in terms of developing greater independence and a more mature attitude to their work. These are positive findings in relation to the aims of the Diploma to encourage independent working and to prepare young people for employment (see Longstowe, 2009). The reported engagement of learners is also positive in relation to the aims of wider 14–19 reforms (DfES, 2005a).

The first research question relates to how the concept of controlled assessment is understood and whether it is seen as different to other types of internal assessment. For some teachers, there was some confusion about the notion of controlled assessment at the time of the interviews. Although controlled assessments are described in the PL specifications, some teachers were still getting to grips with the need to apply defined levels of control to different aspects of assessment (e.g., task setting, task taking, task marking) for their line of learning. Some had initially assumed that “controlled assessment” meant a high level of control (when it really means a limited, medium, or high level control for each of task setting, task taking, and task marking, depending on the profile defined for a particular assessment).

In some settings, teachers were confident in their usual assessment practice and felt the assessments were similar in nature to those they were used to from other qualifications (GCSEs, National Diplomas, etc.). For some, the controls on the internal assessment were not seen as particularly different to usual practice in related subjects or qualifications which involve coursework or portfolios. These points are of some concern given that controlled assessment was selected as the main assessment type for the Diploma PL components in order to promote robust and fair assessment whilst ensuring that the important skills are measured (Ertl et al., 2009). If the nature of controlled assessment is not understood as a new concept, this is a potential threat to the fairness of the assessments as the conditions may vary between consortia, or even within a consortium. However, it should be noted, perhaps, that with any new assessment system a period of “bedding in” is inevitable, and it is likely that controlled assessment will be better understood in time.

In relation to the second research question on the implementation of specific controls, the interview data suggest that these were mostly understood and

appropriately applied (apart from some initial misunderstandings). Collaborative work was mostly felt to work well with teachers and learners apparently being aware of which elements of an assessment task could involve group work and that clarity on individual contributions was required. Plagiarism and inappropriate help were not considered likely to be particularly problematic issues due to the nature of the subjects (lines of learning) and the types of tasks, but it was acknowledged that students needed to be taught about the importance of referencing. Teachers and students knew that most of the work that would be assessed should be conducted at school, under the informal supervision of the teacher, and followed this practice (except where specifications permit research to be conducted outside of the classroom in advance).

Whilst some of the “teething” problems in understanding of the required controls had already been resolved by the time of the interviews, some questions about how to implement the controls remained. For example, in relation to whether it was acceptable for some elements of a task to be completed at home if some students fell behind with completion of the assignment. This raises a question of whether different consortia, or different schools/colleges within a consortium, apply the controls consistently. When asked, teachers felt that standardising the application of the controls across a consortium may be difficult, and most felt that they could not judge whether this was being achieved at this stage. This is potentially problematic given that the assessment conditions are so important to the nature of controlled assessment. One of the key reasons for the replacement of coursework in GCSEs with controlled assessment was to increase confidence that the work submitted in internal assessments is the student’s own. Thus, consistent application of the controls across schools and colleges is important.

However, although there may be possible differences in implementation, it could be argued that having the defined levels of control (high, medium, limited) for different aspects of the process (task setting, task taking, task marking) should improve the consistency of practice across schools and colleges once the notion of “controlled assessment” and the individual controls and levels of control are embedded and fully understood. This, in turn, should improve perceptions of the fairness of controlled assessments compared to traditional coursework models.

Research question 3 relates to the effects of the controlled assessment on the nature of learning experiences. The controlled assessments were seen as encouraging learning and facilitating a less didactic learning environment. The assessments were generally considered less pressurised than traditional assessments for other types of courses. The tasks were perceived to relate to the “world of work” and to be realistic and valuable. These are positive findings which begin to suggest that controlled assessments may be able to provide a high-stakes summative assessment and also encourage engagement through their perceived relevance and promote learning, thus bringing a greater emphasis on assessment as a contributor to learning as recommended by Boud (2007) and others (e.g., Gardner et al., 2008). These findings also link back to some of the key aims of the Diploma in terms of providing better preparation for employment and perhaps also for Higher Education through the combined theoretical and experiential learning (DfES, 2005a). According to UCAS figures (stated in Baker, 2010) on Higher Education applications, the percentage of Diploma applicants receiving at least one offer and taking up places were similar in profile to those for applicants taking A levels.

One question raised by the use of controlled assessment instead of traditional internal assessments is whether the controls limit or restrict the learning experiences

associated with internally assessed work (Research question 4). The requirement for most assessed work to be completed under informal supervision did not place constraints on the work that students could do according to the teachers interviewed. If anything, it was felt that it was easier for work to be done on site rather than at home because of the availability of specialist equipment and support. However, there is a question of whether this view might have been due to the subject domains represented by the Phase 1 Diplomas and whether teachers using controlled assessments in other domains (or with other qualifications, such as GCSE) would feel the same.

One key question relating to the Diploma PL is whether the assessments are having a positive backwash onto learning and classroom practice (Research question 5). From the interviews in this research, it would appear that the assessments are having a positive effect. The assessment types are reportedly encouraging the learning of broader skills (e.g., teamwork, communication, independent working). There was some suggestion that even where the topics and content were similar to those covered across related subjects in other qualifications (e.g., some teaching content in Level 2 Creative and Media was considered similar to content that would be covered in GCSE Drama, GCSE Music, and GCSE Art), the skills encouraged by the assessments were broader giving a “rounder”, more comprehensive learning programme. The assessment activities are felt to be making students more confident, competent, and what one teacher described as “whole people”. However, there may be a risk that the report writing and need to provide appropriate evidence to show the development of student work could potentially become too much of an emphasis in the classroom over time. In general, the controlled assessments seem to be having a positive influence in terms of facilitating the development of relevant and useful skills that may be valuable to future employment and education. Again, this suggests that the assessment is contributing to learning, which is an important feature of good assessments according to Boud (2007).

In answer to Research question 6 on motivation and enjoyment, learners tended to find the tasks that they were conducting for their assessments (or as practice for their assessments) interesting, enjoyable, and motivating. This is very positive given the aim of 14–19 reforms to facilitate increased participation and attainment through providing a wide range of learning pathways through such offerings as the Diploma (DfES, 2005a; Longstowe, 2009). Some learners disliked, and had not anticipated, the extent of writing required. However, such evidence needs to be collected in some way to ensure the robustness of the assessments and that there is flexibility in the type of material that can be submitted.

A further issue mentioned by some students was a concern about the composite nature of the Diploma qualification and what would happen if they failed one element of the Diploma (either a PL unit or another element such as functional skills). They felt that it was potentially unfair for them not to be awarded anything if they failed on just one element. Figures show that only just over a third of the students who began Diploma courses in September 2008 had achieved the full Diploma by the end of 2 years (11,326 learners began courses in 2008, 4,017 completed within 2 years; Ofsted, 2010). Whilst some of the remaining learners may now have completed, these figures do suggest a possible challenge in terms of the completion of all elements. This issue could potentially affect uptake and motivation. Note that, now the new government has announced that individual components of the Diplomas can be offered as stand alone qualifications, this may become less of an issue.

The use of controlled assessments as the main assessment method in Diploma Principal Learning components has the potential to enhance construct validity by allowing the assessment of important and relevant skills that would be difficult to assess via traditional examinations, whilst facilitating a robust assessment through the conditions stimulated by the controls. Based on the interviews at six consortia, it seems that there have been some difficulties in the implementation of the PL controlled assessments. However, some issues are likely to be resolved as time goes on (or to have already been resolved). The main message of this research is that, despite the issues, “at the chalk face” there is much support for the nature of the Diploma PL, the learning mode facilitated through the controlled assessments, the types of skills developed, and the motivation and enjoyment of the majority of learners involved. These findings provide some support for an argument that the Diplomas are able to contribute to achieving at least some of the original aims of the 14–19 education reforms set out by the government in 2005.

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Appendix 1. Interview schedules***Interview Questions – Learners***

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1. I understand from your teacher that you're currently working on some tasks or activities for your diploma controlled assessments (/coursework). Please could you tell me about the tasks you are doing?
 2. How are the tasks different from those you have done for other courses (e.g., coursework for GCSEs)?
 3. Is the work what you were expecting it to be?
 4. With the assessment tasks you've described:
 - a. Are you allowed to do work at home? Do you think this makes it easier or more difficult for you?
 - b. If you are allowed to do work at home, are you allowed to ask your parents or others for help?
 - c. How much help can your teacher give you?
 5. Are you doing any of the activities for your assessments in groups? Does this work well? Are there any difficulties?
 6. Are you enjoying the tasks and activities that you are doing for this? What is it about them that you like? Is there anything you don't like? Do you think the activities are relevant to real life and/or to work?
 7. Do the tasks make you want to try hard to do well? Why? Compared to other types of assessments such as exams and coursework, do the controlled assessment tasks make you want to put in more effort, the same effort, or less effort? Why?
 8. Do the tasks you do help you to learn different skills from those you learn for exams? What kinds of skills do you think you are learning?
 9. Do you have any other comments on the controlled assessments?
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Interview Questions – Teachers

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1. Please could you describe the types of tasks that the students at each level are currently working on for their controlled assessments?
 2. What are the “controls” for these tasks?
 - a. How is collaborative work managed? How does this aspect affect assessment?
 - b. How do you apply the controls in relation to working at home and supervision of tasks? Are any elements of the controlled assessment work conducted at home?
 - c. What kinds of support is it appropriate for students to receive from yourself and from others (e.g., from a family member)? Is this clear to everyone involved? Are there any issues with this?
 - d. Are the guidelines about the controls clear?
 3. How different are the types of tasks compared to the types of tasks used in other qualifications in similar subjects? (e.g., a GCSE in a similar subject)
 4. Do you think your students are enjoying the tasks they are doing for their controlled assessments? What do they seem to like about them? What don't they like?
 5. Does the nature of the work motivate and engage them? What features of the tasks motivate/engage them or demotivate them?
 6. Do you feel confident about how to implement the controls? Do you think they are being maintained across the consortium?
 7. From your experience, do you think that any plagiarism issues associated with coursework assessments will be avoided in the controlled assessment model?
 8. In what ways, if any, does using controlled assessments affect teaching compared to more traditional types of internal assessment (e.g., coursework)?
 9. In what ways, if any, do controlled assessments affect the learning experiences of students compared to more traditional types of internal assessment?
 10. What kinds of skills are the learners developing through the tasks they are conducting for their controlled assessments? Do you feel these types of assessments help to promote valuable skills?
 11. Do you have any other comments on the controlled assessments?
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