

Slow the Diploma juggernaut before it drives us all mad

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The Government keeps exhorting us to look to Scandinavia. I'm not sure which member of the pop group Abba I most resemble, but I'd like to think it's one of the males. The welcome announcement last week that teaching is to become a profession with masters degrees borrows an idea from Finland where, unlike here, being a teacher is deemed higher status than being an X Factor contestant.

Similarly, Sweden has specialist lines of learning in which pupils follow relevant academic or vocational courses without the snobby them-and-us labelling that has plagued the English education system for half a century.

Our solution to that unhappy divide is the Diploma. Note the capital letter. The Diploma, like God, appears to have been granted upper-case status to emphasise its all-conquering omnipotence. And therein lies the problem. What should be a welcome additional qualification for some of our young people is being vaunted as offering so many potential benefits that it's beginning to resemble the smorgasbord at a Swedish wedding breakfast.

You're a concerned employer? This qualification will be vocationally focused. A nervous university admissions tutor? The extended Diploma will be worth a bumper four A-levels. A suspicious Daily Mail reader? The Diploma will be strong on the basics of English and maths.

With Ed Balls' latest points-mean-prizes announcement about the extended version of the qualification, even Diploma diehards must have suffered a tremor of self-doubt.

All of this came in the week that Estelle Morris made some acerbic remarks about her own work as an education minister and the subsequent performance of the Department for Children, Schools and Families. Speaking to the National Education Trust, she said the department was too easily buffeted about by media issues; that it lost its

focus on the things that make a difference; and it spent money on peripheral issues. Perhaps there's a chance for us to learn now from the parable of St Estelle.

The Diploma hasn't yet seen the light of day and the Government and the Learning and Skills Council are already so protective of the unborn qualification that they don't want anything out there that might blight its first teetering steps into the world.

Yet 17 lines of learning in around 119 different course combinations is - forgive the bluntness - utter madness. Let's slow the juggernaut down.

Let's ensure we create a straightforward qualification that will engage and motivate young people. Let's make sure it has a genuine vocational core that employers help to create. Let's insist that the basics of English, maths and ICT are there so that the qualification has credibility and rigour. And let's make it easier for schools and colleges to offer the courses by dismantling the madcap hurdle-jumping Gateway process (supposed to assess their readiness to offer diplomas).

Then let's take our new baby and let it learn to survive on its own. Let's stop trying to justify it as a qualification to get more people into universities: there are existing pathways for that. Let's give up speculating how long A-levels and GCSEs will be around and just concentrate on getting the bloody thing right.

If we're lucky, something extraordinary might happen. The Diploma may prove popular with students, be respected by parents and employers, gain admiration for its simplicity from teachers, and be hailed by the media as a fine education reform.

Then we'll have done something that has eluded our predecessors, their cupboards littered with discarded pieces of past initiatives such as the CPVE and TVEI. We will have created a vocational qualification that is proud to be seen as vocational and not constantly having to dress itself up like some second-rate Abba tribute act. As the fledgling Diploma itself might say: "Take a chance on me."