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TECHNICAL REPORT

Implementation of new curriculum arrangements for 14-19 year olds

International comparisons

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Prepared for the National Audit Office

The research described in this report was prepared for the National Audit Office.

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Summary

1. In 2005 the UK government laid out its plans for 14–19 education in the White Paper, *14-19 Education and Skills* (DfES, 2005). Among other reforms it proposed the introduction of 14 new awards, called Diplomas, linked to occupational sectors of the economy. Diplomas would chart a middle course between academic learning (e.g. GCSEs, A-levels) and vocational education (e.g. National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), apprenticeships) and enable learners to acquire a range of skills in preparation for employment or higher education. Motivated by a desire to establish a more ‘demand-led’ education system, the government initiated an innovative, experimental approach to Diploma development that put Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) and employers in the lead.
2. Against this backdrop the National Audit Office (NAO) is undertaking a study of the government’s 14–19 education and skills programme. The NAO study will focus on the overall risk to the programme in terms of local preparedness to deliver the reforms. In particular, it will examine whether local partnerships are on track to deliver the programme across all areas of England.
3. As part of this larger study, the NAO commissioned RAND Europe to carry out an international comparison of how qualifications with a vocational component, which are comparable to the new Diploma, are delivered in three other countries: The Netherlands, Sweden and Australia. In this three-month investigation the RAND Europe team engaged in desk research to gather information and data, following an agreed template (see Appendix B).
4. The main objectives of the study are to:
 - provide an overview of selected countries’ systems of secondary education
 - describe education qualifications analogous to Diplomas
 - review the approaches used to implement the relevant qualifications
 - synthesise lessons learned that might be applicable to the English context.
5. It was recognised at the outset that contextual differences between countries can limit the extent to which processes or lessons can be borrowed from one country and transferred to another. However, an understanding of the nature of the differences can perhaps reveal new possibilities and suggest alternative approaches or directions. The main findings were as follows.

Curriculum, school organisation and funding affect programme delivery at the local level

6. The extent of partnership for education programme delivery appears related to different factors, especially the structure of the curriculum, qualifications, and schools, and funding arrangements. The Netherlands and Sweden are less likely to form partnerships for education delivery, partly because their education programmes emphasise general education up to age 16 even within occupationally-defined pathways. The Netherlands recently consolidated schools and regional training centres (ROCs), which means that more programmes can be offered wholly within one local institution. Sweden's modularised curriculum provides flexibility for municipalities as courses that make up a programme of study can be organised in different ways. Partnership among education providers is more common at the Advanced Vocational Level, when the curriculum becomes more specialised.
7. The Australian system permits flexible partnership arrangements, but these are underpinned by their qualification structures. National Training Package Qualifications (TPQs) can only be offered by Registered Training Organisations (RTOs). Different types of public and private institutions can become RTOs. At the local level, for example, schools can become RTOs and thereby offer nationally recognised vocational and technical education programmes or they can collaborate with RTOs to provide part of the curriculum.
8. In contrast to the other systems considered, the league tables in England create incentives for schools to compete, not collaborate. Failing schools can be taken over by the government. Differences in funding streams for 14–16 and post-16-year-old learners create barriers to collaboration between schools and colleges by raising complications over who pays. This type of competition is not present in The Netherlands or Sweden, as municipalities have the responsibility and funding for education provision up to at least age 18. The Australian system creates incentives for schools to collaborate with RTOs.

Social partnership relationships support employer involvement

9. Employer participation in the education system is historically strong in The Netherlands and Sweden, and is based on a tri-partite system where government, employers/industry, and employees (unions) have equal representation. The Australian system is bi-partite (government and employers) and also features input from labour leaders, although not as strongly as in the other two countries. These “social partner” arrangements are often backed up by other regulations with respect to the employers' role in design of qualifications, monitoring of provision, and funding arrangements. In contrast, the relationship between the government and employers around education policy in England is historically voluntarist – the government preferring to use inducement policies or to exhort employers to participate rather than regulate them.

Employer/sectoral bodies drive the education system

10. The UK government has charged the relevant SSCs to develop Diplomas in partnership with other stakeholders including education providers (schools, colleges,

higher education institutions). The SSCs are government established and funded bodies, and the Diploma and its development process follow the government's design and initiative.

11. In contrast, in Sweden and The Netherlands the sectoral bodies are independent of government yet have legal responsibility for developing, updating and monitoring provision of vocational qualifications. The sectoral bodies set the framework for education providers to use to develop educational programmes, and determine when changes are needed. Collaboration among social partners is the expected norm at the municipal level.
12. The Australian system is more like England as the Industry Skills Councils (ISCs) are government funded, and they must also coordinate with a variety of other bodies at the state/territory level. ISCs have authority over design of national TPQs, but the states/territories remain responsible for monitoring quality in the RTOs. Even after a decade there are still concerns that employers are not fully represented (especially small and medium size employers).

Extent of integration between academic and vocational learning

13. In The Netherlands and Sweden, integration between academic and vocational learning can be seen to operate at a number of different levels. At the curriculum level both of these systems emphasise a common core of academic learning up to at least age 16, even though most students are pursuing occupationally-oriented pathways. Specialisation generally occurs at upper secondary levels (post 16) for some students. A second level of integration concerns school-and work-based learning; in Sweden for example this amounts to 15 weeks of work-based training organised by schools and employers at the municipal level. Linkages between school-based initial vocational education and continuing vocational education (including for employed adults) represents a third level of integration. Employer/employee bodies are central players at all levels of Vocational Education and Training (VET); their current and forecasted skill needs are fed into the whole system. Similarly, Australia's TPQs count towards the secondary school leaving certificate and must provide progress toward an Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) standard, the same system used for adult education.
14. The Diploma programme evolved from a government-sponsored study of 14–19 education, which proposed a radical reorganisation of the curriculum that would have abolished GCSEs and A-levels as separate academic qualifications. The government rejected this proposal and created Diplomas as a way to bridge the gap between the existing academic and vocational routes. The Diploma is meant to incorporate work-based learning experiences, but the depth and extent of work-based learning, and infrastructure needed for implementation is unknown at this time. The Diplomas are meant for 14–19 year-old learners, and their relationships to already existing NVQs, or progression routes to apprenticeship and higher education, have not yet been worked out. Adult and continuing vocational education policy is proceeding on a separate trajectory from Diplomas. The absence of clear progression pathways for non-

academic qualifications in England marks a clear distinction from the other countries studied.